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Provinces Of The DPRK

[image] [image]
[image] [image]
[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Hiiiiiii. So I'll be putting the art that I put in my other fanfictions here, along with extended information to go with Chasing Liberty. I'll probably also do a collection of sources for things at some point, but I'm at work right now so have the provinces' and North's profiles instead.

They're all Communists and they have the common dislikes of America, South, (except for North, who has a more complicated relationship with him), Japan, imperialism, and capitalism so I haven't listed those in their dislikes.

I have invented the title of Supreme Minister for them, based off of the real Minister positions, which are elected positions. Kim Jong-un isn't the President of the DPRK, he's the elected President of the State Affairs Commission. But the provinces and Korea in my fanfiction aren't elected, they just have to go through votes of confidence at every national election. As Supreme Minister of State Affairs, Korea supervises all ministries and foreign affairs.

Minister of the Korean People's Navy isn't a real position, it would fall under Minister of the People's Army (Defence). I have invented the post for him.

IF YOUR WATTPAD COUNTRYHUMANS ART BOOK DOESN'T HAVE SOURCES THEN WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING?!??!

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fPJjTYGBo4QRuafFkbWTA8imbpr-QP3tD_946Yv_v3A/mobilebasic

https://docs.google.com/document/

d/1ewrcRerI8lyXpykMX11EyMoCFii1Hafakq7t0976eYQ/mobilebasic#h.m6drw9uadz42

Friendship Year

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

I had a dream. I will now describe it. So when I was young there was a konbini by my house. I don't live there anymore. But in the dream I was on my first day working there. But as soon as I arrived I realized I already work full hours at another place and I would have no time to have two jobs. I was literally thinking, 'Wait. Why did I do this?' So I resolved to quit after the first day. But then I got into the store and started to work, then KIM IL-SUNG WALKED IN. Now it wasn't weird that he was in Japan or alive, because my common sense of the dreamworld told me that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were still alive and also that they had retired form politics to get retail jobs in Japan (for Kim Il-sung) and America (for Kim Jong-il) so that they could better understand how the proletariat of enemy countries lived and foster internationalism with them. Kim Jong-un was still Chairman of the Worker's Party of Korea. Also they were all the same age. Which is, strange. Considering they are grandfather, father, and son. Anyways, I grabbed my friend who worked there and hissed, "You didn't tell me Kim Il-sung worked here!" and she shrugged and said I didn't ask. Death penalty for her. So I guess it was a special day where members of the Worker's Party were visiting so I had to set up tables and chairs and serve food. Why was this happening at a konbini? Who knows. So I was thinking, 'I can't work two jobs, but I don't want to quit my other job because my boss is nice. But I can't quit this job because KIM IL-SUNG.' Then a man came over to me, gave me a piercing look, said something in Korean, then walked away. And my friend said, "Fish likes you. He usually doesn't talk to people." Fish? Why was his name Fish? Also implying meetings like this were business as usual, meaning my friend was hanging out with Worker's Party members without telling me. Death penalty for her again. Then we all sat as Kim Il-sung gave a speech. I also want to clarify that the dream was not in Korean, but he was speaking Korean and I had no idea what he was saying. But I started crying. So overwhelmed I was weeping in joy (in character for me; also I never got why people cry at concerts, but I get it now). Then my friend turns to me, and

everyone in the konbini turns to stare at me, including Kim Il-sung. Blood starts pouring from my friend's eyes as she says, "You should wake up now."

So! Whatever that means.

Four Actors

[image]
[image]
[image]
[image]

Character cards for Chasing Liberty <3

Going to describe another dream I had.

So I was on a tour in the DPRK with some classmates and friends and we were standing by a wall waiting for our tour guide to do something. We were in a government building being shown around. There was a room to the side where Kim Jong-un was meeting with some Party members. Then he walked over and started talking to us. So to explain, when I first moved to Canada I couldn't speak English very well and it gave me what could be called social anxiety if I am being honest. But I'm not so it was just nervousness. In my dream I was having that exact feeling. Kim Jong-un was standing a foot away from me, asking us questions and I was turned slightly towards him, but determinedly not looking at his face and answering in the most clipped, military tone ever because I was being crippled by what was not social anxiety. I didn't know you could feel that in a dream. Then he asked if any of us knew how to draw, and my friends said, 'Oh, Miki-chan's a great artist!' And Kim Jong-un said, 'Come with me.' And I turned on a heel and followed him. Did not say goodbye to my friends. Did not tell the tour guide I was leaving. 'Follow me.' 'Yes sir, glory to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.' Actually very in character for me. So I followed him to this meeting room and sat in a chair next to him, and he handed me a paper and crayons and told me to draw something. But I immediately forgot what he told me to draw. And he had started talking to the other people again, and I didn't want to interrupt. So I panicked and drew a picture of 9/11. Planes crashing into the towers, fire burning. Eventually he turned and asked if I was done, and I handed it to him and the moment it left my hands I

remembered that he had wanted me to draw a 'Walmart Supercenter.' I don't even know what that is. I think I visited a Walmart twice when I was in Canada. I profusely apologised, still being burdened by not-social-anxiety, but he just laughed and said it was well-drawn. Then he asked if I wanted to meet some Women's Union comrades, and obviously I said yes, so I spent the rest of the dream just following Kim Jong-un around as he talked to people, being plagued by anxiety the entire time.

I need a Kim Jong-il dream to complete the trifecta. I swear I don't dream of the DPRK every night, but every one of my dreams is just as strange as this.

Nonconsensual Hugging

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]
[image]

Every picture I've drawn of North being hugged against his will (so far). Ugh, I feel like I'm not good at anatomy. Whatever. I'm not allowed to be a perfectionist over small things.

My favourite movie is O Youth. I like the moral of 'women that can beat you up are wife-material.' At one point they scheme on how to get their brother to realize this and the idea they come up with is getting family friends to jump the couple in a park at night so that the woman can beat them up and impress the guy. And it works!

My second favourite movie is Real Onigokko. I've seen it once on my friend's floor at two at night while she slept and it left me confused with tears streaming down my cheeks. I will not watch it again.

Out Of Context

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Here's some out of context pictures for future chapters I have planned! ^^

SH! (she's fine)

Two different versions of what looks like CCCP propositioning Kangwon in a car (not what's happening, I swear).

The comrades.

North Hamgyong and Hwang.

I wrote *such* a great future chapter for Chasing Liberty. I can't post the latest one yet because I just got out of hospital (I'm fine, God can't kill me until I finish the book) and it's one of those things where I *think* I'm clear-headed, but I'd like to be sure I am before I edit the chapter.

Hae The Tank

[image] [image] [image] [image]

As suggested by @4shiro Hae has 'giant hammer' vibes. She would definitely be a tank, and her health bar would be enormous.

I based her armour off a combination of old Korean armour, a choson-ot, and those really impractical female armours in games. Would a heart-shaped breastplate work? Who knows. I was going to give her a pink, heart-shaped hammer, but I had to use the Worker's Party hammer. She also just has military boots.

Couldn't decide what headpiece I wanted. So here's a traditional Korean inspired helmet. Those horns can't be practical.

Fancy KPA general hat.

And this mask is inspired by a yeongno, a Korean monster that eats rich people.

I was discussing this with friends yesterday. For anyone that celebrates Valentine's Day and White Day, when do you give obligation chocolate to the same gender? My friend asked if I was giving chocolate to all my coworkers, but I just gave them to my boss. I save chocolate for women for White Day because I feel like if I give it to them on Valentine's Day I'm placing them in the 'male' role, which could be upsetting to them. Whereas I do not care if I am in the 'male' role. I give all my friends chocolate on both days because we're close so social conditions don't matter. Even if you don't celebrate either of these days, weigh in on it please. I've been told I'm over-thinking things, and I'd like to know if I am. Also both days are evil consumerist propaganda, but I homemake all my chocolate and I love giving people food so it doesn't count.

Kangwon + UIP

[image] [image]

[image]

[image]

Here's a picture of North in the same pose.

Had the weirdest dream last night. It involved me, a bear named 곰 (bear in Korean), Russia from Hetalia (never watched Hetalia), Sadako (Ring girl), a werewolf, a skinwalker, a Chinese guy named General Lee, and Peter Griffin. The fat guy from that American show that I've also never watched. It was so convoluted and nonsensical but we were in a forest, the bear mauled Mister Griffin, Russia turned into Sadako-chan and attacked General Lee and I in what was genuinely a scary scene. Also the three of us were best comrades and we had served in the military together (what military? Who knows) so it was really alarming. We had no idea when our friend had been replaced with a scary girl. And at one point this evil person- who I think was the werewolf and was from something else, but I can't remember who they were- was tracking this girl and we were all trying to throw him off the scent. Except the thing we were using to throw him off the scent was a jacket I own in real life, so we might have been tracking me? Also I think I was the skinwalker at some point.

Healer Kangwon

[image]

As requested, Kangwon as a healer. I guess he can use magic now. His clothing is inspired by a durumagi, but mixed with the Circle Mage robes from Dragon Age. And also a KPA medic's armband of course.

My friend is taking her cat back soon. I'm so sad because my boy got along with her so well. Hmmm. I wonder what the logistics of fleeing to the other side of the country and starting a new life with a stolen cat are.

Pajama

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

Fulfilling multiple requests at once. Hwang, Ryanggang, and Korea in the old man pajama.

Made stunning grilled fish for breakfast. I'm sure it was cooked properly.

Self-conscious

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Someone said 'more CCCP' content. I assume you meant his breasts.

Genderbend

[image]

As requested, female North and North Hamgyong! I hate when mangaka do genderbend and make someone who dresses normally as a guy wear tiny skirts and half-shirts as a woman. Or when a boy with muscles is suddenly a waif as a girl. Or when a grumpy guy suddenly has a smile on his face when he's a woman. So rest assured they are both still incredibly irritable and capable of killing you. North would wear the same casual outfit he does as a man, but I decided to put her in business attire because I wanted to. And North Hamgyong usually wouldn't let his jacket slide down like that, but... there was a... strong wind... By Talos! I'm being blown awaaaayyyyyyy
ahhhhh!womenwithbicepsahhhhhhh!

The average human mind cannot conceive of the amount of fun I have.

Online Footprint

[image] [image]
[image]
[image]
[image]

North (well, Korea) reacting to the genderbend comments, as requested. North couldn't react to it because there is no scenario in which Nipponia walks out alive.

Gap Moe?

[image]

[image]

[image] [image] [image]

Working on the latest chapter - no.
Drawing CCCP shirtless - yes. Clearly my priorities are in order. Some of you (you know who) will be very happy about this. You would probably be happier if I could draw shirtless men better though.

Another weird dream. Two actually.

So in the first one, I was in Castle Town from Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time. It was in the future part of the game so everything was run-down and apocalyptic and there were ReDeads everywhere (zombies, basically). I ran from a throng of them into a building and down a flight of stairs. At the bottom was a 1950s retro American house. So I was in the main room, there was a kitchen off to the side that had daylight pouring through the windows, even though I was underground and it was dark outside, and there were stairs in front of me. Then a woman's voice called 'I'll be right down!' in English. She sounded like a regular American woman with a light, clear, cheerful voice. But in that moment I felt sheer terror rush through me. I knew I needed to leave *now*. I turned and ran for the stairs behind me, but I went down the wrong hall, and into one that narrowed until I would have to crawl up a ledge and into a tunnel. I tried to do that, became terrified when I realized I could get stuck in there. So I tried to run back to the proper door, crawling back out. I fell onto the floor in the main room and there were feet in front of me. Just regular house slippers with the hem of a light blue, white polka-dotted dress brushing them. And in that moment I realized that I would go insane if I saw her. I knew that I was in a dream, but I also knew that if I looked up at whatever was standing over me and saw her face, I would lose my mind in real life. Then

with all my might I tried to leave my dream, and suddenly I was sitting on my floor in front of my television, on the PlayStation 4's main menu. I had exited the dream like a video game. Then I woke up for real.

Part 2 of this dream which happened recently.

I was in the apartment bloc I lived in when I was in Russia, and my cousin's cat had escaped into the stairway. So I went looking for her, and found a cat that looked like her. But I realized it wasn't her, it was a different cat and it didn't look... right. But I followed it, hoping it could lead me to my cat. I followed it up and up and up as the stairs got narrower and narrower until they were barely wider than me. Finally I reached the top, and the stairs stopped, leaving a ledge that I had to climb onto. The other cat had vanished, but my cousin's cat was up there, so I jumped up and crawled towards her. Then I realized that there was an apartment around the corner. I peered around it to see a 1950's American house interior with black and white checked tiles and cheerful yellow flowers sitting in vases on a table, along with an old American lamp. The walls were the same shade as the flowers, and there was bright light pouring through the room, even though I couldn't see any windows. And there were cats sitting all over the apartment, staring at me. They looked wrong, just like the first cat. I got really unsettled and knew there was something not right about them. Then I heard a woman's voice, the same one as before, calling out that she would be right there. I could hear her coming closer, humming, moving through the depths of the apartment towards me. I wanted to grab my cousin's cat, but she was sitting right in sight of the apartment and I didn't want to put myself in the open. So I was reaching for her, desperately trying to reach her, and I realized I wouldn't be able to before whatever was coming reached me. And again, all of a sudden I knew it was a dream and that I needed to get out because if I saw her face I would go crazy, so I forced myself out into another dream.

So! Whatever that means.

APRIL FIFTEENTH

Kim Il-sung’s birthdayyyyy! happy birthday Kim Il-sung! I love youuuu. I asked for today off for religious reasons and boss said, 'You're not religious, why do you really want to stay home.' Because it's Kim Il-sung's birthday and I simply cannot contribute to our economy on his birthday. And he asked if I just wanted to take it off and now I don't work today. I had a dream about him (Kim Il-sung not boss) once where I was walking with him in a futuristic Pyongyang, even more futuristic than it looks now, and we were talking about how Korea was Reunified and Worker’s Party policies and how the transition from Socialism to Communism was going, and he was telling me about his regrets and successes in life and I woke up crying. I will make soup today for his memory. I also made an edit for his memory. It's very simple, but I didn't sleep last night to make it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YULwrMMq8ZA

Big Brothers

[image]

Working on many chapters right now, so have a drawing I did some time ago. It's China, Kangwon, and Krim during the Girls' Day chapter of Warring Pyongyang. China took them out to sugar-daddy them.

Baju Kelawar

[image] [image][image] [image]
[image]

(at night)

As requested, Korea, Chagang, and North Hamgyong in baju kelawar! I hope I made them look okay, I could not find a single reference picture for how crossed arms would look in it. Then I was halfway through ordering one to wear to make one myself before I realized I hate to spend money. So! There you go.

Also Chagang's fluffy pink socks are a gift from Hae.

Pokemon!

[image]

Hwang in Pikachu onesie, as suggested. And bonus Hae in Eneko onesie! Which is my favourite Pokemon. Also its evolution. Also every cat Pokemon ever. If I were a Pokemon trainer, I would have every fire cat and an Eneko.

Namibia

[image]

Namibia. I made her design awhile ago and I always think about it because I want her dress.

Making real pizza tomorrow. Surely this can't go wrong.

Tsundere

[image] [image]

Requested! Korea in this parka. He hates everything Nipponia has ever gifted him. He still thinks it's psychological warfare and he may be right.

Hanging out with my friends tonight! Excitement!

POV You're America

[image] [image]

Alternate expression for Hae in chapter A Woman Who Wants For Nothing in Chasing Liberty. I feel like the first one better captures what I was going for- mostly concern with a bit of shrewdness. But I do like the even mix of judgemental and shrewd in the second.

Had another Kim Il-sung dream. I was working in some sort of small two room office in the town I grew up in, and he was my boss. I came into the place to change my shoes before I left, and he offered to make me tea. I didn't want to bother him, so I turned him down and went home. CURSE YOU DREAM ME. But also, very in character of me not to want to cause someone hassle. He was radiating such a warm, fatherly vibe. Apparently my subconscious really wants Kim Il-sung to have a small job in rural Japan.

Reading Lessons

[image]

Hae and Hwang during the Occupation when he was teaching her to read.

Working on my Battle of Chongchon River chapters. It was supposed to be one chapter, but it is looking more like four. Oops.

Had a dream last night that I was a man with a wife and daughter, and long story short the lights in our mansion were evil, and they made us evil, and we ended up killing each other. We were huddled on the futon together, and we knew what would happen when the lights all came on. I sliced open my thumb, my wife stabbed our daughter, then I drove this cooking knife through both of them. Then I was me and the man I was before was chasing me with a chainsaw because he was still possessed with evil. He cut off his own leg with the chainsaw and I thought it was sad that he would die alone, so I went to hold him in my arms. Then I realized people don't really bleed out that fast when they have only sawed their below knee off, and be was still actively trying to kill me, so I dropped him and ran away again. And he was hopping after me. Then as I woke up, I heard this stomping noise, so I awoke thinking 'He's in my house?!' But it was just my cat.

The Light Of Allah

[image]
[image]

[image]

[image]

More casual alternative (Iran got them for her)

Traumatic memory that I was thinking of today- there is a area near me with what I think is called an irrigation canal. It is big enough to get a small boat down, and too rural for anyone to stop us even if we're not allowed. And my friend has a kayak. So we go along this canal and find a large tunnel. Obviously we want to go through it. I'm in the front. As we enter I see them. Large, round balls. Hundreds of them it seems. Spiders. Very. Large. Spiders. I scream and we rapidly paddle back. Then I regird myself, we go back in, I see them and scream again. I am not afraid of spiders but I cannot stress to you how many they were. Hanging there. I could see gogogo hovering around them. It triggered some primal feeling in me to retreat. Final time, plan of action. Friend steers while I sit in front and wave my paddle in the air to destroy the webs. The thick, huge webs that stretch from tunnel wall to wall. I crouch down, raise my paddle, close my eyes and start swinging. We enter. Friend finally sees the horror I saw. Screams. I command her not to back down. We're going. I'm waving my paddle. I can *hear* it hitting the spiders, and I can *hear* them plopping into the water. Friend is still screaming. I'm screaming at her to steer and telling her that if we tip I will kill myself. She is giving me a verbal description of what is happening. 'They're huge! One is above your head! It's stuck to your paddle!' My eyes are closed because I do not want to know these things. I have to open them to get the spider off my paddle as it is coming for me, scuttling down the pole for my hands. I am still screaming as I can't smack it against the wall because then we will

go right through the spider webs, and if I feel the beasts on my face I will capsize us. Also I am seeing the spiders as I get within a few feet of them. Finally I get the spider off, slam my eyes close again and hunker down. Then light. We are out of the tunnel. Both still screaming. My skin is crawling. We're both demanding each other to check if there are spiders on us. Once we are a safe distance away, we go to get onto the shore and I see it. Big yellow spider. Right in my kayak hole. I leap up and my friend screams again because she thinks I'm going to abandon ship. I am calm now. I vanquish the spider. Then jump out and full body shudder. We check each other for spiders. We destress. We realize that in order to return home, we need to go back through the tunnel.

I have no idea what kind of spiders they were. There were different types, big and small. But mostly big. I think the one I killed was a joro-gumo because it was yellow, but I have no idea. Which is sad because I do like joro-gumo, they're pretty, but... not in that concentration. I cannot say enough that I have never seen that many spiders before, living so close, all together. Whenever I think of this I get very squirmy.

Baby Photos

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]
[image] [image] [image]

People from other Soviet Republics argue about their relationship being problematic. You would think it's because Nipponia was physically sixteen at one point while Russia was twenty, but it's actually because when Russia was a boy of twelve years, his girlfriend was a full-grown man. They're both physically and mentally twenty now though, so it's fine.

Colour versions:

'Get better at backgrounds.' No.

Liaoxi And Liaotung

[image] [image] [image]

Them in their PVA uniforms, circa 1950-1953

These are their causal wear. Soviet dresses were popular with Chinese women in the 50s, so that's what Liaoxi is wearing, while Liaotung is wearing a more causal errenzhuan outfit.

In 1954, Liaoxi and Liaotung were merged back into one province, Liaoning, which they had been before. This is her modern day outfit. She still performs errenzhuan with Jilin, and is a poet laureate. She has a pen attached to her shirt, and frequently writes snippets of poetry on her arms when she doesn't have her notebook.

Made such a good pasta last night. I'm going to share it with you.

Caramelize onions
Add garlic, wait for it to turn golden
Add tomato paste
Add Lao Gan Ma; fry
Add salt, pepper, and garlic powder
Add coconut milk
Add cheese. Real cheese. I don't care if you have to take out a loan or you're lactose intolerant. Suffer for the taste, like I do.
Boil noodles. Any type. Udon, radiatori, ramen. I think because it's a sauce, Italian noodles would work better, because udon tends to slide out of sauces.
Consume or give it to people. I really like cooking, but I'm neutral towards eating. Which is unfortunate since I have no idea how to eye portions. I had to eat borsch for seven days straight once. One bowl in the morning, one at night. I ate nothing else. But it was really good borsch, so I'm not complaining.

WAIT I FORGOT I PUT FISH SAUCE IN IT. COMRADES NOOO DON'T FORGET THE FISH SAUCE IT TIES IT ALL TOGTEHR IT'S UMAMI

Three Comrades (One-shot)

2014

"It was an honour having you here, Namibia."

Namibia's full lips curved up as North Korea bowed politely to her.

"I'm always willing to attend a birthday party. Especially for someone who made such grand statues for me." She swished the hem of her vibrant sunshine-and-emerald dress, smiling coyly. "If you invite me to the next one, maybe I'll visit again."

"My people built the statues," North deflected. "But I am glad you liked them. You'll definitely receive an invitation to my next Foundation Day. Maybe we can use the opportunity to discuss more co-ventures in the future."

The Korean country ardently kept his back to the eyes burning into him, though he sensed the knowing smile belonging to one pair.

Namibia laughed, a full-bodied sound for someone so tall and slender. "More fun ventures, yeah?"

"If you're going to be here next year, Namibia, I suppose I will be, too," the knowing smile said from behind North.

The African woman raised her brows. "Make sure to bring some of those Chinese milk candies. They might get you further. Not far enough, but further."

"When the goal is your company, I'm content simply staying in one place," China said, smiling winningly. "So long as it's by your side."

Namibia shook her head, grinning. "You really are dangerous, huh? I better leave before you have time to think up more pick-up

lines."

"Have a safe trip," North cut in, knowing full well that the Chinese country needed no time at all to think up more compliments. "My comrades outside will take you to the airport."

"Thanks, North." Namibia waved as she strutted from his high-rise. "Oshi iwete, everyone."

The door shut, and the third person in the room waited a full five seconds before slurring, "Are you sleeping with her?"

China turned to the boy leaning on the lobby counter with mock affront. "You know I never mix business with pleasure, Russia. Namibia and I are simply close friends who share many joint finance projects."

"Then stop flirting with her in my country," North interjected while Russia hummed in skepticism. "It's getting in the way."

"Think of it as softening her up," China said airily. "Putting her off-balance so you can suggest some military exercise or something or the other."

"Tch." It really was a military exercise North wanted to set up with the African country.

'Know-it-all bastard.'

"Namibia has standards anyway," Russia said, supporting himself on the counter with one muscular arm. "I guess she wouldn't sleep with a slut like you."

China clicked his tongue. "Words can hurt, Russia."

Despite his own words, he looked uninjured.

North grimaced at the use of the epithet, but made no attempt to defend the other man. It was true, after all. He had found out on last year's Foundation Day that, at some point during his absence, his comrade had started committing his body to women instead of just flattering words.

By 'heading home' with one of North's people. He had done it again on this Victory Day as well. And no amount of disgust or threats from North seemed like they would stop him. He despised it, but as the women were willing, there wasn't much he could do.

"Degenerate," he said aloud.

"Sorry, what was that?" China turned his head to him, smiling.

"Nothing," North grumbled, knowing he and his bat-like hearing had heard him clearly.

The kitchen door opened, and someone came stumbling out of it, supported by another person.

"You two," the Korean country called to his provinces. "Go to sleep."

"Yesh, Comrade General," South Hamgyong slurred, drunkenly saluting. "It'sss what... we're doing."

"I'll get 'er up to bed, Korea," Ryanggang said morosely. He was drunk, too, though less out of it than his cousin.

"So many stairs," SH groaned. "Sometimes I mish our chosonjip."

"We're takin' the elevator," Ryanggang sighed.

Irritated, North called, "Everyone who got drunk tonight has to wake up before the morning music and run twenty laps around Kim Il-sung Square."

There was a loud groan and deep sigh before the doors slid shut.

North huffed. Maybe he should rethink having holidays be the only time his provinces were allowed to drink to excess. Those days were also when foreign Countryhumans visited.

"That goes for you, too," he said to Russia.

"Come on, comrade, be nice to me," the boy pleaded, but he remained firm.

"While you're in my country, you obey my rules."

"Is that why you never come visit me anymore?" China asked.

"Yes." North turned for the stairs.

"Wait, comrade." Russia grabbed for his sleeve as he passed, catching it after a few attempts. "Can we go for a drive first?"

"No," North said bluntly, tugging the black sleeve of his workshirt free.

"Please?" The tricolour Countryhuman made a wide-eyed face that had been much more compelling when he was a gap-toothed child and not a man. "If you are to torture me, I want a last request."

"It's twenty laps, not torture."

"And this is the first time we are all properly back together," he added. "This is only the second year since China's stopped exiling himself, and I couldn't stay over last year."

North had stiffened at the mention of the exile, while China merely asked, "Who said it was self-imposed? Perhaps North here just decided he didn't want to see me anymore."

"If it wasn't self-imposed, then why did you never visit *me,* either?"

Russia's voice had lost its joviality, replaced by an edge of bitterness. North clenched his teeth, cursing China. Their ally had actually been in a good mood all day, even if it was a drunken one. The last thing they needed was him sinking into another depressive state.

It had been *him* dealing with those, when China had been radio silent for twenty-three years, out sleeping around or whatever he had been doing. *Him* who Russia had called sobbing on the phone those first few years, then in person after the Arduous March had ended and North had let him visit again. *Him* that he had come moaning to with cuts on his arms and alcohol in his blood, puking

on North's floor and trashing his high-rise. It would be just like China to set him off, then leave him to clean up the mess again.

Luckily, the red-skinned man backed down, spreading his fingers from his sleeves. "You got me. It was self-imposed. I just couldn't decide what to wear."

"Fine," North cut in, wanting to steer the topic away from the gap in their... acquaintance. "We can go on a drive."

"Really?" Russia asked, brightening like a child.

"Really." North looked at China. "You're coming, too."

He smiled. "Is that a question?"

"No. I don't want you harassing my people."

He had tried to revoke his previously given permission that let the Chinese Countryhuman be unaccompanied in his country. It had been unsuccessful.

"Mmmm." China pretend to think about it. "I suppose I wouldn't mind a car ride. It would be just like old times."

When they would fuel up North's car and drive around the country in the eighties. To show their foreign ally the advancements they were making, if anyone asked. But the reality was that they were simply driving in circles.

"Папа used to put Estonia in the car when she couldn't sleep," Russia said suddenly. "I would go with them, sometimes."

"You owe me for the gas I use," North bluntly told him.

He was only doing this because he didn't want a key ally moping around or taking himself out of commission. He wasn't about to let him drown himself in pointless memories.

"I will bring you apples next time," Russia promised, heading for the door.

"What am I, a horse?" North grumbled, checking for his car keys before trudging after him.

He nodded to his door guards as he passed, then slid behind the wheel of his sleek, black government vehicle. China claimed the passenger seat, while Russia hopped in behind him.

"Can I drive?" the Chinese country asked.

"No." North threw them into gear. "I still remember how you are behind the wheel."

"Very fast," Russia agreed. "You should let him drive, comrade."

That word again, even though the Russian country was no longer a Communist.

North sighed, pulling onto the main road. "When we're in the countryside."

Ssi-bal, the things he did for diplomacy.

"I can't help but notice how courteous you were to Namibia," China remarked as they drove through the streets, the glow of the streetlights flickering by them. "Why aren't you ever that civil with us?"

"Because I hate you."

"A compelling reason," China aknowledged with that knowing smile of his.

"Do not lie. We know you love us, comrade," Russia slurred, throwing an arm around his shoulders from the back seat.

"Are you *trying* to crash us?" North demanded, almost swerving. The last thing he needed was for a traffic controller to see him careen off the road with two foreign Countryhumans in the car.

Russia roared with laughter, then sobered. "Maybe."

North bit his tongue on 'Keep me out of your suicidal tendencies.'

When the Slav was 'happy drunk' as some of his provinces put it, it could be difficult to know what would bring him crashing back down.

When they had reached the city limits and left the lights of Pyongyang some distance behind, China delicately cleared his throat. North sighed deeply, slowing the car to a stop on the side of the road.

He got out, dirt crunching under his boots before being replaced by the smooth asphalt as he walked around the front of the car. As China passed him, he trailed his fingers over his shoulder. North shrugged him off.

He made sure to jump in before China could. He could just picture his comrade tearing off down the road without him, leaving him to grind his teeth for a few minutes before returning.

China smiled over at him from the driver's seat, slyly, and he knew that was exactly what he had been planning.

"Seatbelts fastened?" he asked innocently.

North tightened his, then reached back to make sure Russia's was secure. He had a habit of removing it. Before he was done, China was slamming the gas and they were speeding down the road.

"Don't you *dare* crash my car," North ordered, hand gripping the door.

"What was that?" China asked, looking over at him as he wrenched the wheel sideways, almost making them spin.

North grit his teeth, knowing that saying anything else would just encourage him to drive worse.

China was not a bad driver, unlike South Hamgyong, who hit every second curb, and frequently had to use her allowance to pay off traffic fines, or Russia, who had a tendency to drive while less than fully sober, and had crashed at least five cars since he had become an adult.

He was simply a dangerous driver, going far too fast, taking his eyes off the road, pulling risky maneuvers. Sometimes North suspected he did it on purpose.

"So, where's that daughter of yours?" China asked casually as their tires churned up the dirt on the side of the road with a growling sound.

"Krim is with Primorsky," Russia said. Now that North was sitting in front of him, he had his arms around the headrest, and his shoulders. "I'm picking her up at Vladivostok after this. I wanted her as far away from Ukraina as possible while I'm here."

"I never quite pictured you as a father."

North cast a warning look at China. Talking about fathers was definitely on the list of things that could set the Slav off.

"I am a good dad," Russia said, somewhat defensively. "Krim chose to be with me."

"Alcoholic father or Neo-Nazi mother." China hummed. "A choice for the ages."

"Exactly," Russia said, a bit too satisfied with that reponse. "She's a smart girl. You will get to meet her soon. I would have brought her today, but North won't let me."

"I'm not letting an annexed territory in my country," North growled, struggling out of his grasp. "I have enough problems."

"She wants to meet you, too," Russia said, undeterred. "I have told her much about her Uncle North."

"Don't call me that," the Korean ordered, irked. "I'm no one's uncle."

"And I'm far too young to be one." China reached an arm back, and Russia held out a hand, accepting whatever came from his long, scarlet sleeve. "Save some of those for Krim. Tell her it's from Big Brother China."

"I will," Russia mumbled around whatever he popped in his mouth. Those little strawberry candies that China was always feeding South Hwanghae and Chagang, it looked like.

China offered his sleeve to North, who looked away at the dark plains around them, muffling a growl from his stomach.

He suddenly looked back when the car started to weave side to side, eye wide with alarm at China, who had taken both hands off the wheel, his arms now hidden in his sleeves across his chest.

"What are you doing?!" North hissed, grabbing for the wheel as Russia *'whoop'*ed in delight.

"Looking for something in here to entice you." China smiled over at him, not lessening his foot from the gas pedal at all. In fact, he seemed to apply more pressure.

Aggravated, but not wanting to crash, North grabbed the wheel with one hand and thrust the other out. Victorious, China dropped a few items into his palm before finally taking 'control' of the vehicle again, though he didn't slow down at all.

North growled at him, then examined what he had been given. Several wrappered candies, white with purple lettering.

He went to tell China that he hated sweets before grimacing, realizing that they were preserved plum candy.

He looked over at him, finding his comrade watching him with a small smile. Scowling, he looked away, grudgingly unwrapping one to place in his mouth. It was salty and sour, with only a hint of sweetness.

South Hamgyong and Ryanggang liked these. He would save the rest for-

"I have a parting gift for your provinces as well," China said, making them weave erratically over the road. "So feel free to eat all of those."

North made a face at the window, not looking at him as he

slowly chewed on the plum, tuning out the sound of Russia complaining about his sister in the back.

"-And then she started dating Canada. Canada! Can you believe it?"

"No," North said, trying to sound like he cared as little about this topic as he did as he glared at the arms that were around his shoulders once more.

"Right? He is a puppet for America, through and through." Russia slammed a palm on the back of his seat. "I can't have Krim around a pussy. A child needs a good role model."

His arms briefly left North, whose skin twitched at no longer being touched. There was the sound of the man behind him unscrewing and drinking something.

"Good thing she has you, then," China said. He always sounded vaguely sardonic, but he was excellent at masking sarcasm.

"Да. Drink?"

North slapped China's hand away from the bottle of soju that had been thrust between them. He smiled, making no protest.

"You, comrade?"

North pushed the alcohol away from himself. "No. I don't drink."

"You drink sometimes," China said, and the Korean wondered if he was thinking about that golden day towards the end of the war.

"I don't drink," he repeated icily.

Russia shrugged. "More for me. Anyways, you can see why I had to take Krim from out of that environment. *Canada,"* he repeated in distaste, taking a swig of soju.

"While I agree with your sentiments about him, have you considered that maybe it's not normal to be so obsessed with whom your sister is courting?" China asked.

"She is not only my sister, she is the mother of my child," Russia slurred, slapping his shoulder.

"Never say that again," North said immediately, grimacing in disgust.

"It's natural to be worried about who the mother of your child is fucking."

"I *will* leave you on the side of the road," North threatened.

"Ладно, ладно." Russia took another drink. "Should we talk about China's conquests instead?"

"Conquests," their ally echoed, sounding pleased. "I like that."

"No," North immediately shut down.

"What about yours?" One of Russia's arms returned to his shoulder. "Do you have a woman yet, comrade?"

"No," he repeated coldy, shrugging him off. If he was courting someone (which he would never do), the last people who he would tell would be *these* two. "Why do you have to act like highschool boys? Have some decorum."

"I'm included in that?" China asked.

"Yes."

"Highschool boys *wish* they were as successful as me." He smiled at him.

"No more talking about this in my car," North said loudly. "We're coming up on a security checkpoint. Get out."

"You know, if you just said nothing, they wouldn't think anything of me driving." China tapped his foot on the brake, making the car do a little stop-start dance.

"If you screw up the braking system, I'll kill you," North promised. "And you don't have a Korean license."

"I'm sure with you in the car, no one would say anything. If they did, you could just throw your weight around to silence them."

"Unlike certain other countries, I at least *try* to follow the laws in my own country." The Korean glared at the both of them.

"I always follow my own rules," China said with mock humility at the same time as Russia said, "Where's the fun in that?"

North sighed. "Get out."

He switched places with China again, flinching as he briefly touched his elbow.

They pulled up to the checkpoint, where he greeted the soldier there by name. "Comrade Seo Chung-gun. Quiet night?"

The curly-haired man nodded. "Had a civilian bound for Anju break down earlier, but we got her fixed up and back on the road. ID, comrade?"

North leaned into the glove box as China quietly noted, "He's actually giving him his ID."

"And he is actually looking at it," Russia commented.

"Do you think he has many doppelgangers?"

North tried not to make a face.

"Where are you headed, Comrade General?" If Seo Chung-gun was bothered by the presence of the foreign countries, he said nothing.

"Kanggye," Russia said next to North's head.

"No," he whispered, annoyed. "That's too far. And you know I don't allow tourists there."

"You allowed me there," China added, leaning close.

"During war time," North growled. And a few times during

rebuilding. "We'll go to Sinuiju."

The Chinese man smiled slyly. "If you don't take me back to Kanggye, I'll always remember it as flat and fire-bombed."

North bared his teeth at him, then put on a neutral expression for Seo Chung-gun. "We're going to Kanggye. Diplomatic mission."

Russia gave a quiet "Ura," and China settled back, satisfied.

"How is Comrade Yun Jong-hi?" North asked the soldier in order to silence his allies, and any thoughts his comrade might have about a diplomatic mission in the middle of the night.

Seo Chung-gun brightened at the question about his wife. "She's doing well. Her illness is all better, and the baby is doing great." He laughed a little. "It's been a bit difficult adjusting, but we're managing. She says she's ready to be back in the uniform by next week."

"Good." North nodded, pleased. "But she still has four weeks of maternity leave left. Tell her to use them all. Being a mother is just as important as being a solider. It's her responsibility to raise our future."

"Yes, Comrade Korea," Seo Chung-gun said with glowing eyes. "Maybe she'll actually listen if it comes from you."

He handed him back his ID with a callused hand. "All's good. Carry on."

North wished him a good night, then drove on.

After several moments, China asked, "Do you know everyone in your country by name?"

North kept his face flat. "You don't?"

"I have a few too many people for that," the well-populated country replied with an aloof air.

"Me too," Russia agreed.

"Quality over quantity." North kept his eye on the road, ignoring the affronted looks that were sent his way. He managed to succeed at maintaining a neutral look.

They were nearing Anju, so he stayed behind the wheel. There would be another checkpoint beyond it, then he supposed he would trade places with China again.

What had he gotten himself into? He had thought this would be a quick outing. Now they were on their way to Kanggye, a three-hour drive through the mountains. It was midnight, and they hadn't even been on the road an hour. It would be dawn by the time they returned to Pyongyang.

They passed through Anju, the way being lit by the lights coming from the occasional window of a pastel pink or blue bloc or house. North may have taken them just slightly out of the way to get a glimpse of Paeksang Pavilion, an old building in Anju Fortress that he had rebuilt after the war had wrecked it.

"Impressive," China noted, seeing the silhouette of the sweeping roof in the dark.

Smugly, North took them out of the city, and through the next checkpoint, where he greeted this soldier by name as well. Not far away, he traded seats with China again, managing to dodge his touch this time.

As they drove through Kaechon, instead of taking the more northwest road, China turned them northeast, away from Kanggye.

"What are you doing?" North asked tensely, twisting in his seat.

"Taking you to a secluded location to do awful things to you, obviously," China said breezily. "I was thinking we could take a detour through Tokchon."

"Tch. Why?" North thought he knew, though.

"For the memories, perhaps?"

"You two fought a battle here, didn't you?" Russia asked, popping

his striped head between them. "I remember you telling me. Didn't North save your life, China?"

China smiled over at him, knowingly. "That he did."

North hunched his shoulders at the reminder. That wasn't the full story, as he had later learned from China. The reminder of that conversation irritated him.

"Get your head back." North placed his hands on Russia's ushanka, shoving him away. "Your breath reeks of soju."

The boy leaned around the other side of the headrest, exhaling a wave of alcohol-scented air at him.

"I'm going to bury your body in the mountains," North grumbled, scrunching his face in distaste.

"They'd find me. I'm large."

"I'll bury you deep."

Russia thought for a moment. "Feed me to pigs instead. Less evidence that way. And you don't like wasting resources, anyway. And pig that eats me will make for good bacon."

North rolled his eye, trying to unwrap another preserved plum as quietly as possible.

Tokchon was a small city compared to Pyongyang or Anju, nestled between the Chongchon and the Taedong. The mountain that rose over it was just starting to turn gold for the fall.

"Much more impressive than when we fought here," China remarked, looking around, presumably. It was hard to tell with his eyes.

"Obviously," North snorted. "That was sixty-four years ago."

The city hadn't been more than a collection of houses and a school built around a marketplace. It had been overrun with reactionary soldiers that they had surrounded, pushing them back

to the occupied militia headquarters before destroying them.

Now it sprawled across the landscape, holding both an elementary and secondary school, alongside a theater, an arena, a multitude of libraries and stores, and every other modern amenity. And the Worker-Peasant Red Guards had a much more impressive headquarters that he made sure China drove by.

"Times change," China said as they left the city behind, heading back for the main highway. By his tone, it was hard to say if this was a negative or a positive for him.

"Да," Russia agreed, staring out into the dark ridges that had started to rise around them. With him, it was easy to tell.

The silence that fell over the car was heavy. China seemed content to let it simmer, forcing North to speak.

"Will you visit for New Year's?"

Russia looked at him, eyes brightening again. "You want me to?" Then he deflated. "I should spend it with Krim. I'm going to try and make салат оливье from scratch for her."

What CCCP had always made for his children and North, when he visited.

Russia waited a few more seconds for him to respond, then said, "But if you invited her..."

"Looks like you won't be coming." North sighed, then softened his tone. "Give it a few years. Once some of the attention on her dies down."

"It won't," Russia murmured, his voice starting to grow mushy as the alcohol finally started to drag him under. "They'll never leave me alone. They hate me."

"Join the club," North muttered.

And *he* had never even annexed anyone, rightful territory or no.

"But you don't hate me..." Russia's words trailed off into a rumble, and North glanced over his shouder to see that he had indeed fallen asleep.

They drove in silence for a few more ri.

"We could turn back now that he's asleep," China said, not slowing the car in the slightest, though his driving had grown smoother.

"No." North didn't look at him, keeping his eye on the mountains. They would be passing through Huichon soon.

"Why not?"

"Once I've decided to do something, *I* do it." He flicked a pointed look at him, then back away.

"And then we drive aimlessly into the mountains. Unless there is an aim." There was a smile in China's voice, and almost definitely on his face as well.

"There is not." North refused to look his way.

The radio turned on, and China started to flick through stations, cutting off each voice as it started to speak or sing, creating an annoying stuttering sound of half-heard information and music. He settled on a pop song.

It played for a few seconds, filling the cab of the car. *'Whistle,'* a song from the 80s. It was a feel-good love song with no deeper meaning.

North reached over, changing stations until he found a news channel where a male broadcaster was reporting on tomorrow's expected weather.

China changed the station again, finding another one playing light, instrumental music.

North let this play for slightly longer before switching it back to a news channel. The woman on it started to report about new housing

developments in Anju.

They listened to this for a full minute before China sighed and switched the radio off.

"Is that what you do when you drive? Listen to reports about things you already know?"

"I don't listen to the radio when I drive."

His comrade tapped his long fingers on the wheel. "So you drive in complete silence, staring at the road? Where's the fun in that?"

"I don't drive for fun," North replied, staring back at the landscape. "I only drive when I have to go somewhere. I use the opportunity to think about what I have to do when I get there."

"So, complete silence, staring blankly at the road," China confirmed.

"If you *don't* think when you are behind the wheel, that would explain things."

His comment earned a laugh, one of China's real ones. Then it earned the car turning entirely sideways before straightening out again.

"Don't do that again," the Korean ordered stoically.

His comrade smiled. "Sorry, I can't understand you. I'm not thinking."

North rolled his eye.

They were in the heart of the mountains now, surrounded by towering forested peaks. The occasional transport passed by them, hauling ores or fertilizer or food to his people. But beyond that brief company, they had the road to themselves.

North didn't know why they were still out here. He should have told China to take them back when Russia had fallen asleep. It wasn't like there was anything to do in Kanggye at two-thirty in the

morning.

"He's quite cute when he's sleeping, isn't he?"

He glanced over to see China turned in his seat to stare at Russia, eyes fully off the road.

"Cute?" North snorted. "He's a six-foot tall man."

Maybe the word could have applied when he was young, but even then he had been a gremlin. Harassing him for shoulder rides or pestering him to tell him war stories, always calling him 'брат,' like he was one of his brothers.

'Annoying little creature.' Big creature now.

"Don't be jealous," China said airily. "I think you're just as cute."

North gave him a withering, semi-disgusted glare that was ignored.

"I notice you let him call you 'comrade' still, even though he's a capitalist country now." China finally put his eyes back on the road. Or he had closed them and was simply pretending to be watching where he was going.

North glanced again to make sure Russia was still sleeping soundly. The boy didn't move, a quiet snore emanating from him.

"Just because he isn't a Communist, doesn't mean he doesn't have any use to me," he said, looking away. "If he wants to think we're comrades, that's fine by me."

"So you're using him?" China asked, not sounding bothered by it.

"You aren't?" North stared out the passenger window, seeing the glimmer of lights from a village on the far away mountainside, envisioning his people sleeping soundly in it. Even if it was sometimes faulty, there was electricity in every village. As it should be.

"Of course I am. But when you say it so easily, I might start to

think you're using me, too."

"I am," North said bluntly.

With the collective hand of the Imperialists on the neck of his economy, he had to. Electricity was difficult to come by when there was a *very* limited cap on his imports needed for energy. Not to mention everything else he was not allowed to purchase or export. China was his in to things his people were denied by 'international law.'

To keep his people warm, fed, and safe, he would use anything or anyone he had to.

"I suppose that's only fair, since I'm using you, too." The car did lazy swerves over the road, crossing the middle line before drifting back. "Who else would sell me so much pado for such a good price?"

North hunched his shoulders.

He knew China was using him. Of course he was. But whatever he was getting couldn't compare to what he gave. He had invested far too much in North and his country, even when he hadn't been speaking to him personally, for North to ever return.

Whatever China was using him for, he couldn't tell. It wasn't just cheap seafood. He was getting something else out of this. Maybe in the past he hadn't been, but now... He had to be.

"Friendships are built on use, after all," China continued as they took a bend, coming far too close to the guard rail around the cliff edge.

"When have I ever said we were friends?" North muttered. "We're comrades, nothing more."

"Close comrades."

"Comrades of average distance."

"Comrades of no more than three feet part."

North knew China could see his face in the window reflection, so he kept his lips pressed flat. Eventually, he turned to look at Russia.

Their ally was sprawled in the seat, head tipped back against it, mouth open and ushanka askew. He had taken his suit jacket off to use as a blanket, but it had fallen down, puddling on his lap. The soju bottle was clasped loosely in his hand.

China took his hands fully off the wheel, twisting in his seat to lean into the back. North, used to this, took the wheel, steering them far more safely than China had been, even with only one hand.

His comrade adjusted Russia's jacket, pulling it up over his broad shoulders and tucking it behind him before sliding back to reclaim the road.

"I suppose he is useful," he remarked, smiling.

He wasn't, really. His President was. His industries and people were for helping North dodge sanctions to provide for *his* people. But Russia himself wasn't really good for anything beyond keeping connections to those things. He had been getting better at running affairs lately, taking a slightly more active role in his country than before. But he still showed up to the DPRK half the time too wasted to talk without slurring, let alone coordinate joint projects. Mostly North just used him to facilitate meetings between their leaders.

And he knew that Russia's President barely listened to him. Even if Russia wanted to sever ties with North, his government would keep working with the government of the DPRK. Not because the Russians were Socialists, but because the enemy of their enemy was their ally.

The Russian Countryhuman's use value, in Communist terms, was incredibly low.

He looked young right now, head back and a line of drool running from his mouth. It reminded North of when he was a republic, and he would climb on top of him when he visited CCCP, falling fully asleep while he spoke business or politics or personal matters with

the Soviet country.

North had never got to say goodbye to CCCP. The last time they spoke had been an arguement. North had been snapping at him for his government asking for repayments of loans, bleeding him dry. The tall man had been patient as always, assuring him he would speak with them, change their minds. North had known he couldn't. CCCP had been a Communist still, as had his people. But by the late eighties, his government had been filled with wreckers and American infiltrators.

'You are losing control, CCCP.' Those had been his last words to him before he had stormed from his office.

Then CCCP's coup, his attempt to wrench that control back into the hands of him and his people, had failed, and the vote for the dissolution had been put up. Still, North had not contacted him, giving him the cold shoulder. He knew it wouldn't happen. Regardless of the corrupt government, his people still loved the Soviet Union and the Socialism they had had. They would vote true.

And they did. They had voted overwhelmingly for him to live.

And Gorbachev had not listened. And CCCP, the closest thing North had ever had to a father, had been killed.

And then everything else had come.

North had never gotten the chance to say goodbye to CCCP. But if he did, he thought he knew what his father would have told him.

The Korean Countryhuman reached back, fixing Russia's ushanka on his head, making it a pillow. Then he gently worked the nearly empty soju bottle from his fingers. Russia smacked his lips in his sleep, shifting, and North gently touched his knee, stilling him, before turning back to the window.

"Yes," he said in reply to China. "He is."

He swished the last few centimetres of clear liquid around the green bottle, the glass cool on his fingers, then tipped it down his throat. It burned.

"Not afraid you'll catch something?"

He snorted, trying to sweep away the melancholy from his mind. "I would be more afraid I'd catch something from you."

"I think that's quite enough quips about my sex life tonight."

China's voice was light, but North backed off. His comrade may toe the line with him, but he had never crossed it. And while he could never quite tell where exactly China's lines were drawn, he didn't want to accidentally step somewhere over them.

They traded places for the last checkpoint before Kanggye. As they passed each other, China gently hip-checked him. North scrunched his face at him.

They pulled into the silent city at two twenty-eight. China's speeding had saved them almost a full hour of time. The streetlights created puddles along the main avenue, the shopfronts dark. Some of the apartments towering in the residential district still had lights lit, yellow eyes watching over the city.

North pulled the car over on the street, turning it off. The only sound was the tick of the cooling engine, and Russia's occasional soft snore. China made no move to speak, so he didn't either.

Down the street, a group of teenagers walked in a cluster, laughing quietly, most likely still excited from the Foundation Day celebrations. They stopped in the umbrella of light cast by one of the lamps, and one of the boys grabbed a girl, sweeping her dramatically in a messy waltz, the hem of her bright skirt flaring. She shrieked, then covered her mouth.

"I met a woman here," China said abruptly.

"I don't want to hear it."

His comrade laughed, as soft as his voice was. "No. When I first arrived here, back during that war of ours."

'Ours.' It was supposed to have been *his* war. Him and his people's. It was supposed to have saved them, Reunified them.

Now it was sixty-four years later. And it was he and his brother's war.

"I was asking around about you."

"I hate when you do that," North grumbled.

"Unfortunately for you, I enjoy it." China smiled. "Do you know what she said about you?"

"Obviously not."

"Hmm."

China was silent as they watched a soldier approach the teens, drawn by the girl's shriek. They couldn't hear what was said, but by her red cheeks and the boy's mischievous lip biting, they were clearly being reprimanded. They bowed in apology, and the soldier shook his head, smiling fondly before sending them on their way.

They giggled, heading towards their car as the girl slapped the boy on the shoulder, giving him her own scolding.

"What did she say?" North eventually asked.

China smiled. "That's for me to know."

There was no way to find out what had been said about him. It was over six decades ago. The woman and whatever she had said might not have even survived the war. North's heart panged for her.

Had she been a soldier that he fought beside? A government worker or a Party member that had worked with him? A refugee he had brought food to in the caves?

China could have made her up. Only saying it because he knew something like that would stick with North. He really was the worst.

"You're an idiot," he said bluntly as the teens drew near. One pointed at the government vehicle, and they craned to see who was beyond the tinted glass.

China laughed, a real one again. He could tell by the way his teeth flashed. "Perhaps. But I'm your idiot, at least. Just like he's our idiot." He tipped his head at the sleeping Russia.

"I don't lay claim to either of you," North muttered.

As the teenagers walked by, one waved. The Countryhuman lowered his window, sticking his hand out to hail them back. The others joined in, waving vigorously, laughing giddily as they went by, discussing who it could have been.

"Times change," China said once again. North still could not discern how he felt about that.

"The world moves forward," he agreed, surrounded by a city that had once been destroyed by enemy bombs and filled to the brim with refugees fleeing mass slaughter. "Things get better."

"And worse."

"Then better again." North's knuckles whitened around the wheel. "The world moves forward."

They stayed in Kanggye until the sky started to lighten in the east. Then North started the engine, and they pulled away, back to Pyongyang.

It was easy to fall back into old habits with China. Almost as if he had never left him.

After the checkpoint, they got out to switch seats again. As China went to touch his hand, North pivoted, grabbing his wrists, twisting them behind his back, and bending him over the hood of the car.

"You can let me go now," his comrade said after a moment, voice muffled by his face pressed into the metal.

North made an expression he couldn't see, then released him.

The drive back was mostly silent. North was mulling over words left unsaid and unknown, people left behind, and those he had a responsibility to, his people and... otherwise.

China was being China. Gazing down the road with his always-closed-but-always-watching eyes.

"Wondering what I'm thinking about?" he asked, not looking at him.

North wondered if he said 'yes,' China would actually tell him. Almost definitely not.

"You think?" he instead snorted.

"Occasionally I connect two wires and a single, shining thought is produced," his comrade replied, his smile leeching into his voice.

North snorted, looking out the window again. He saw China through the reflection. He made eye contact with him, eyes open for once, and flashed a grin. North sunk his fangs into his lips, trying desperately to keep them from curving up.

He was mostly successful.

At the last checkpoint, as they switched, North gently punched China's shoulder as he passed him. The sun's light reflected off his comrade's white teeth.

Seo Chung-gun had been replaced, but North greeted the new man by name as well, as he had with every other soldier. As they drove towards the city, he gave a small, smug smile. China shook his five-starred head.

Back at the high-rise, they worked together to haul Russia out of the car and into the lobby, North nodding once more to his guards. The fragrant smell of bean sprout soup emanated from the kitchen. North Pyongan's soft voice came from behind the dining room door, followed by South Pyongan's tired groan. The morning music had already played, meaning his more hungover provinces wouldn't be able to do their twenty laps. He would get them next time.

He didn't call out, not wanting to answer questions such as where he had been or why he was coming back so late. Or early. He just hauled Russia into the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

As they brought him to the room he always used when he stayed here, the boy awoke.

"Пап?" he asked groggily.

North grit his teeth, looking away, but China said lightly, "If we were that large, carrying you would be far easier."

"You carried me?" Russia blinked, looking around blearily at the hall. "We are back at North's house? Is what time?"

"Still late," the Korean said before China could answer. "You fell asleep so we turned back."

"Sorry, comrades." Russia yawned. "Next time I will stay up." He slumped, almost making North stumble. "Thank you for doing that for me, for always driving me. Я люблю вас."

North's eye widened as he pulled them into a drunken hug, his skin shivering wildly at the sudden sensation of being so close to others. The weird words had frozen him, which was why he was unable to pull away or tell him not to say that again.

"We love you, too," China said casually, now fully doing the job that Russia's legs were supposed to be. "But I do think you're about to crush North."

Some of the weight on him lessened as Russia straightened up, swaying. "Sorry. Goodnight, comrades."

He staggered to the door, sliding it open, then closed. There was a heavy thump from inside the room.

China sighed. "I suppose I'll sleep with him tonight. Or this morning. It would be unfortunate if he choked to death on his own vomit." He smiled at him. "He wouldn't be so useful to us then, would he?"

"No," North mumbled, looking away. "He wouldn't."

"Do you want to join us?" China asked.

North remembered watching Soviet movies with Russia and his siblings curled up on their laps; of the night they had been unable to return to their own countries because of a major snowstorm, and had to sleep on CCCP's couch, waking up with his legs tangled with China's and finding that at some point in the night Russia had snuck down to sprawl across them. He thought of passing out on his kitchen floor or yard with China back in the seventies, talking about Juche and Socialism with Chinese characteristics and technology and the blindingly bright future.

And for a moment, he was tempted.

But this wasn't the past. And he could no longer bring himself to sleep around them anymore. Just because it had been irritatingly easy to slide back into old habits with China didn't mean he could let himself. The fact that it was so easy just meant he had to be even more on guard.

Even if it was simple to pretend that China had never left him, he had.

North would not let himself be hurt by a boy who had grown into a disastrous man, or a man who was playing games he could not even fathom. He couldn't afford to.

"No," he said, his skin still trembling. "I have my own room. Goodnight."

"Chaoxian."

He wondered if he shouldn't let China's voice stop him. But he did.

"What?"

"She said you were the kindest man she had ever met. And that if she died, she was glad it was in Korea."

North's heart glowed, even as he started walking again, leaving his friends to sleep together while he went to sleep alone.

He supposed there were worse people to be using.

This is a… character study. Or a relationship study. Yeah. That sounds official. I definitely was not just driving in the car with my friends at night and feeling【emotions】 that I decided to project on my boys. No.

Hambu And Hae

[image]

Inspired by that one meme.

Had a strange dream the other night (shocking, I know). There was this virus that was sweeping the world, and I think it was making zombies. Or something like them. I can't remember fine details, but at one point I was the scientist discovering it, and when I looked through the microscope, the bacteria were moving and making the shape of a swastika. It actually looked very cool, would make a nice anime scene. Then I was me and I was on a tour in the DPRK, which was the one place not affected yet. But the CIA was trying to introduce the virus to them by smuggling the zombie things in. And I went rogue with some random Korean woman, who might have been my tour guide. We were dressed in Shingeki no Kyojin type outfits, with belts and short jackets and had wakizashi that we were using to hunt the CIA zombies. We were scaling buildings with wires. This was not sanctioned by the North Korean government. At one point Kim Jong-un was talking to some people and me and my tour guide(?) were in the background sidling away so we could continue on our mission without having to answer questions. Also I forget the context but one of those blue things was there. The little blue things with the white hats and shoes. But it was large. I killed it with wakizashi to the chest and lit it on fire. Unsure if it was also infected with the Nazi(?) virus or if I just thought it was a freak of nature that needed eradicating. Much to consider.

Hockey Match

[image] [image] [image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

A scenario that was suggested to me. I didn't actually draw them playing hockey because I don't think my skills are quite high-level enough for that. I mean, I don't think I drew Canada's reflection right.

'Mudding,' as I was subjected to, is when they put you in a truck and drive really fast and irresponsibly down a mud road with the windows open. Or perhaps it is a prank that is played on foreigners who stupidly agree to go driving with people they don't know very well. It's fun either way.

Conversation between Korea and China:

Korea: Who are you betting on?

China: "No one. I'm only keeping track of everyone else's."

Korea: *suspicious glare*

China: *smiling* "A wise man knows that even if his rooster wins the fight, he can still lose."

Korea: *thinking for a moment* "...I hate you."

Had a dream last night. Don't remember much, but it involved a

hotel, a stranger's suitcase that I seemed to know belonged to two dead enemy spies (American?), a two-piece swimsuit that I decided to take from it, and a demon. I was trying on a dead woman's swimsuit (I don't even wear two-pieces, so I must have just felt like it), while talking to some invisible demon. Not about anything important. I think we were just talking about the swimsuit. I remember thinking something like 'I look really good in this. Sad that woman is dead.'

Hihi

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Some of my RPG characters! I'm not skilled at drawing people, but I worked for a long time on these so I might as well show them to someone. Don't be mean to me, I know they're not the best. Rest assured their character models are gorgeous in the games.

Most beautiful woman alive. Religious icon. In a relationship with god. Certified weird girl. Saved the world, remade the entire south of the continent, got her arm taken. Currently she's living in the worst city in the world sleeping far too much as she tries to find her boyfriend in her dreams to stop him from destroying the world, even though she wants him to. 'She's amazing!' 'Yeah... Just a bit strange, though.' 'Oh yeah, *really* strange.' Update as of Veilguard: disappeared into The Torture Prison forever with her boyfriend without a second thought. She's happy now with just him and her (and the tormented, Blighted dreams of huge stone creatures) forever.

Homicide, manslaughter, larceny, assault, bribery, theft, intimidation, blackmail, soliciting a prostitute(s), political corruption, animal cruelty, heresy, war crimes, racism. She murdered landlords, too, but that's not a crime. She's either the best person you ever met or she killed your wife, stole your family sword, and called you a slur. Either way she changed your life. In her short term as a political figure she performed the first agrarian reform in Thedas' history, and inspired the peasants in her land to rise up. But not because she is a good person, just because she hates taxes, landlords, and humans. Got rejected by a straight girl. Now lives in the forest with a pack of wolves living off raw meat and being plagued by evil nightmares. Never sleeps more than twenty minutes at a time. The only reason the parasites haven't killed her is because her body is poisoned by Blight so they die first. The only things keeping her going are spite and pride. Update as of Veilguard: the Blight took her over and she returned to her homeland to be put down like a rabid wolf by the straight girl she

loved and Elanna.

Her character arc was learning that terrorism is okay sometimes. Lives in the worst city in the world. The city was blown up, but she came back and now co-governs it with her best friend, nepotism abounds. 'It's not mages versus templars, it's the working class versus the rich.' '...Hawke, don't you own a mine?' 'That's not the point.' Hides all her guilt with sarcasm. Her mother's face was cut off and attached to a bunch of parts from other women's bodies, then she died in her arms. 'Never trust a blood mage.' 'Isn't your wife a blood mage?' 'Merrill isn't a blood mage, she's Merrill.' Update as of Veilguard: her best friend is dead and she will never be truly happy again.

Stolen from her family, sold as a slave, bought as an assassin. Her first act as a mage was to give in to possession and annihilate a bunch of other children with blood magic, has really cool lightning scars all over her body from this. Exploited by her first trainer until she killed him, messed up one of her first official assassin contracts, can't write, deathly afraid of her new boss and thinks he wants to kill her (he is very fond of her and she's the only one who doesn't know), possessed by what she thinks is a desire demon but is actually a spirit of liberty. Kind of an overall failure but incapable of feeling regret. 'Nooo my trauma didn't affect me at all, really.' Saving the world is a contract, not really emotionally invested in it. 'She's a top-notch assassin, so she's probably really subtle.' *Rook fist-fights an entire bar* Her boyfriend is also possessed and now the leader of the assassins. Also he once had a crush on her boss. 'Why didn't I tell you I was possessed? Well, Lucanis is possessed, too, and his whole thing is *way* worse than mine, so I didn't want it to seem like I was trying to show him up or anything.' 'Your journey irrevocably changed you, you can never go home' blah blah. Well Rook *can.* She has a 9 to 5 killing people and she needs to get back to it. The only woman out of my Dragon Age characters who can be objectively said to have a good end.

Veteran. Hero of the galaxy. If you meet her, you love her, and if you don't, you're probably dead. Eight different types of PTSD. She's not smiling, she just looks permanently smug. Had her hair genetically changed to red when she joined the army. China levels

of driving. 'You took us off a cliff!' 'Yeah but we didn't crash.' Spent a day hunting down her clone and vowing to mount her head on the wall. When she got the chance, she tried to save her. Ended up watching herself commit suicide by slamming into the side of a high-rise at top speed. Physically remade the galaxy. Died twice. 'You and your cult of personality!' '...You mean my friends?'

Daddy issues. Has an AI in her head. Got red-rim mods for her eyes when she joined the army to match her dad. Wakes up every day to apply her geometric square eyeshadow. SH levels of driving. 'We're spinning!' 'We're fine!' *goes down a mountain and has to be airlifted off the planet* Technically fighting in a guerrilla war against another solar system. The only good thing about never getting another Andromeda is that she gets to be happy with her girlfriend and friends forever (with the eternal looming threat of being attacked by a massive empire that wants to assimilate them).

For the next Dragon Age, I'm planning on making an elven mage assassin who romances the other good assassin guy. 'No one cares.' I care. I'm so excited for it.

Doodles

[image]

My dream last night was interesting. I was North and I was with the provinces. But I was me at the same time (you know how dreams are). We were defending Pyongyang in a war. But we were absolutely not in Pyongyang. I've been in Pyongyang, and that was not Pyongyang. There was a combat portion where we were manning the battlements on an old Korean fortress, fighting against giant mecha. Then we were in the hills to the north of the city, and there were these cars coming with people in them. I/North charged after them because I knew they were scheming something, and I came to this pavilion on top of the mountain where there were four guys- a blond British man, this guy from Нюхач (Russian TV show) who is a Japanese CEO, a Korean reactionary, and another guy who I didn't look at as much, but I think he was American. They had taken Andraste's ashes (Andraste is a religous figure in Dragon Age game series who led a slave rebellion then got burned at the pyre. Her ashes can cure any illness, and you have the choice to preserve or defile them), and were planning on using the defiled ashes to do some dark ritual. We needed pure ashes to combat them, and the provinces were freaking out, but I/North had a moment straight out of my game character where I said something like 'You think I didn't take any of the magical ashes that can cure any illness? Of course I stole some.' So we were going to use these to combat the ritual, and then I had a secret plan to give them to Kim Il-sung to turn him into a divine figure like Andraste. But before the battle could happen I was suddenly at someone's house at a party, and I was just me now. And there was this scratching sound and I asked what it was, and everyone started being dodgy about it, and I started freaking out. 'What is it? What's in the walls? Why aren't you telling me? *What is it?!'* until the host had to shamefully tell me she had rats in her house. And I immediately flipped to completely relaxed, just 'Oh yeah, rats. We used to get bad mouse infestations when I was young. Happens to the best of us.' Then I woke up.

Chibi!

[image]
[image]

As promised, chibi.

Also as promised, North and Fluttershy. I hope she looks okay enough, I've never drawn a horse before. Though maybe horse is a strong word here.

Lately my friend who is not aware of politics has started sending me videos of Trump and Biden and saying things like 'they should quit politics and run away together.' I fear I started this by sending her a video of Comrade Kim Jong-un and Mister Putin and saying they reminded me of us. But I will not take responsibility for this.

Drinking Buddies (China's Perspective)(One-shot)

China was many things. An artist, a musician, a soldier, a politician, a Marxist, a slut, a 'lying bastard' (affectionate), a lying bastard (derogatory).

And right now, he was also wallowing.

He took another swig from his can of soju, before dropping it on North- on Korea's dining table. His friend would hate how slovenly he was being, leaving rings of sticky alcohol on the fine wood surface, and painting characters in the wet.

But North was no longer here. Korea was. And when China had drank with South, the careless man had only laughed when he had 'accidentally' spilled soju all over the table and carpet, and said that someone would clean it up, so who knew how he would feel.

China leaned back on the pile of red cushions he had made, staring at the ceiling.

He had known that something was wrong. He had known that it was suspicious that the militants in Hong Kong had increased their violence at the same time as those in Ukraina and the Baltics had, drawing CCCP and Russia, drawing *him* away from North.

But he had still gone. Because he was not the beuracratic dictator his enemies said he was, and he could not in good faith send some low-ranking Party member to drag Hong Kong back to Beijing. His 'little cousin' had been furious enough that it was China essentially quarantining him, even if he had understood why.

He wanted more autonomy, not independence. And he certainly didn't want another Western country colonizing him, even if that was what those rioters wanted.

And America knew that. Just like he had known China would go to him. Because after all those years of pretending to be cold, careless, and opportunistic, of fooling not just Western politicians, but his own, and his provinces, and his loved ones, they hadn't been enough.

He had fooled the UN and the rest of America's puppets. They couldn't strike Korea or Beijing because there was no way that China, selfish as he was, wouldn't be hidden miles underground in a bunker. It had fooled his Party, most of them, those who knew he loved his people, but also 'knew' he wasn't above secreting himself away while they fought tirelessly.

But it hadn't been enough to fool the one person that really mattered.

It didn't matter that America's monetized call for information on China's whereabouts hadn't been answered. He knew he was in Korea, because that was where his friend was. And he knew he would go to Hong Kong, because when the militants had set off those bombs, the timing almost certainly at their puppet master's behest, it had not only hurt China, but his 'little cousin.'

What was the point of it? China had chosen his role to protect his people, not just those who were Chinese citizens. He had spent years crafting the perfect mask, pushing away those he loved, pretending he had forgotten the past, opening up his country and closing himself off and abandoning his best and only friend for twenty-three years.

What was the point of any of it, if in the end, it wasn't enough to protect one of the people he loved?

The door to the dining hall opened, and China immediately changed his expression, putting on his smile.

'Let it be Korea.' Let him have come creeping in to give him that look that China knew meant he felt apologetic about something he had said, even if he wouldn't actually apologize for it. Let him sit down and call him a slob as he took one of the soju cans for himself, and then let them fall asleep on the dining room floor like

they had used to.

But he knew it wouldn't be him. Not just because he was Korea now, but because even as North, after their reunion his friend had no longer slept near him. Even when China offered and he gazed longingly at the heated floor. It never hurt. China knew the role he was playing didn't encourage vulnerability from others, and he knew his friend had his own role to play, one that could no longer fall asleep with his head pressed to China's while they stared at the ceiling.

So of course it wasn't Korea.

It was Y/N. Looking as sad and pathetic as he had expected. Her eyes were red and her hair mussed. She stared at him for a moment, blinking tiredly.

"Hello," he greeted her, his voice smooth as if he hadn't been wallowing in grief. "You're up late."

Of course she was. Grief made a poor bedfellow, and with his current state, China doubted that Korea made one at all.

Y/N looked as disappointed to see him as he was her. "When did you get back?" she asked, her voice raw as she stepped into the room, closing the door.

"An hour ago." He smiled at her. "Korea didn't tell you?"

"We're not really... talking right now," she said awkwardly, looking down, her eyes glimmering slightly.

There was a certain satisfaction that it wasn't just him his friend was pushing away. Not solely the South half of him telling him to hate China alone.

"I wonder why," he asked, and he was tired and drunk enough that he let his smile show a bit of his true feelings. "He didn't seem so eager to talk to me, either."

North had always picked him up from the airport personally. He said it was to keep China from having alone time with his people,

but the red-skinned man knew the truth of the matter.

He had come this time as well. With CCCP behind the driver's wheel of his car, something North never would have allowed. While it had always amused China to make the Soviet chauffer him around, to North, being behind the wheel put him in control over their large ally.

He wasn't in control now. He was a Soviet Republic. And while CCCP had always been fair to his republics, and would treat Korea well, that was not the point. Neither North nor China had ever wanted to be 'treated' at all. And maintaining his autonomy and freedom had been even more important for his friend, who had made it his everything.

"I heard about the Reunification," he said to Y/N. "That's really not Chaoxian anymore, is it?"

He had never been 'North,' not to him. He had only ever been Chaoxian, and that was still his name, even though the person was different. But the woman did not speak Mandarin. Even with her translator in her ear, she wouldn't catch his nuance. She probably thought Chaoxian meant 'North.'

China picked up his new can of soju, taking a large swig from it. It was sweet. He could never understand why soju had always been the drink North brought when they drank together, when his friend hated such sweet things.

"Are you... drunk?" Y/N asked warily, still not leaving.

He thought he was. China hadn't drank to drunkenness in years, even when he pretended he did. Alcohol had never been his coping mechanism of choice- sex was. It was less damaging, and didn't addle the mind.

But he couldn't have sex tonight. He couldn't bring himself to go flirt with some poor woman that thought she could mean something to him, then delete his number from her phone as he slipped out into the night. His mask was already dangerously closer to slipping than it had been in... years.

"Who knows?" he said to the woman, shrugging. "I just had to destroy my little cousin, and I lost my best friend. I'd say I deserve to be drunk."

Y/N blinked, looking surprised and frightened. "Hong Kong? Did you...?"

The words had just slipped out, acting by instinct even now, and it made him smile bitterly. Part of him wanted to tell her that yes, he had killed Hong Kong. He had crushed him into golden dust and blew him off his palm, to spark that fright to fear and send her scurrying away.

He wouldn't, out of consideration for his friend, and what he had promised him.

"No," he admitted. "He's in solitary confinement." Not quite solitary. The others would visit him. He just had to be kept out of the militants' bloody hands, and America's. All of his provinces had been recalled to the capital. "As for our people..."

It wasn't many of them, but it was enough. Maybe after this war, there would be no more foreign-backed terrorists, or attempted colour-revolutions, or American NGO's trying to slither their tentacles back into China.

But for now, there were rioters with guns and bombs. And they would die. And so would his soldiers, and so would the innocents they were protecting.

"War is war," he said to her, shrugging, ignoring the way his changshan slid down his shoulder. He'd unfastened it when it felt like his collar was choking him. "Even when it's with family."

He thought of North, looking back at his brother's body as he bled out in the rain years ago. He thought of himself, of his 'brothers and sisters,' all left behind now, nothing but pretty, sparkling dust.

"Especially when it's with family."

The woman looked saddened at that, pitying. For North's sake, he decided to take pity on her in turn.

"Come here." He took a cushion from his throne, setting it next to him and patting it invitingly.

"Why?" she asked, crossing her arms. North's caution of him had rubbed off on her, it seemed, though less feigned than it was on his friend.

"You lost your boyfriend, and you look like you've been crying."

There was a bitterness in that, the same he had felt when his Chairman had died and his people had cried out in anguish. When he had stood watching, unable to keen and wail as they did because he had to be strong. The Revolution was not one man. It was China, and China stood firm. And alone.

'You didn't know him like I know him. You didn't call him Xiao Zedong. You didn't drink with him. He never held your hand and told you that he loved you more than anything.'

Y/N didn't know North like China had. She had known him for under a year, and been his girlfriend for even less than that. China had been his friend for over eighty of them. She hadn't walked miles in the coldest winter in decades to help pull his country back from the brink by fighting off the Americans, she hadn't carried him from Seoul as it burned, she hadn't been carried on his back all the way from the Raktong River as he refused to leave her behind.

There was a jealousy there, China would admit. That perhaps even in that short time, this woman had been let past North's walls in a way he hadn't been, because she was not another country.

But he hadn't been able to keep his secret promise to North, so he would keep the one he had made after they had seen what merging had done to Israel-Palestine.

So he said, "I'd say you deserve to be drunk, too," to the woman, and pushed a can of soju to her as she sat hesitantly next to him.

"What did he say to you?" she asked, popping the tab on her can

to take a hearty swig.

"Didn't say a word in the car, didn't even respond to my attempts to tease him."

China had been prepared, at least, since CCCP had had the courtesy to call his people in Beijing and have them pass the news about the Reunification on. There had just been no way to prepare for how his friend would look at him.

As he had slid into the back seat with Korea, the other man had leaned away, not greeting him at all.

"Two eyes again, I see," China had hummed, keeping his smile up. "That must be nice."

Korea had just glared warily at him. No, not warily. He was always wary.

He had looked frightened. In the same small, scared way that South had always looked at China when he leaned too close or opened his eyes at him, bravado fading.

Even in the beginning of their relationship, when North had been so sure that China had come to do something awful to him, annex him, stab him, poison him, etcetera, he had never been afraid. Wary, suspicious, cautious. Not afraid. Even after China had ended their no-contact and unveiled his new mask, North had still not feared him like others did. Because they were friends, and he knew China would never hurt him, even though they both sometimes pretended that he would.

"Told me to stop touching him," he said to Y/N, staring into the depths of his soju. "Not in the way that North did, he wasn't just trying to be all cold and brooding."

His friend was not as averse to being touched as he liked to pretend, though it had taken even China some time to realize that. North didn't- hadn't minded being touched. He had simply not liked *letting* himself be touched. But he wasn't as skilled an actor as China, and could never disguise the way he leaned into a touch on

the shoulder or arm, even when he batted your hand away. It was a weakness in his imperfect mask.

It wasn't unusual for North to say, 'Don't touch me,' to him. It was unusual for him to mean it.

China had brushed their shoulders together in the car, testing him. And he had flinched back in a way he hadn't for years, since they had first met, when China had been foreign and an imagined threat.

'Don't touch me!' he had hissed, not in mock anger or disdain, but in terror, his wide eyes flashing.

"It was like he actually didn't like me," China choked out, though his voice remained smooth, if a bit melancholy.

He threw back the last of his can, immediately opening another, blurring his mind with the alcohol. He wished the soju was bitter. He wanted the burn of fire down his throat. He didn't deserve the sweetness.

He had failed, after all.

"There goes my only friend."

Because North was. China was friendly with Venezuela, Pakistan, and a handful of the African countries, and he had gotten along well with Palestine and some of the other Middle Easterners. But they weren't Marxists, and even the ones that were didn't have Socialist governments. His fellow BRICS members were unrepentant capitalists who cared for nothing more than money, and simply saw China as the fairer way to make it.

Russia saw him as more than that. But it was hard to think of the boy that he had carried around on his shoulders as a friend, and not as someone like his provinces- a 'little brother' that he had to look after. In a similar vein, CCCP had never seen him as anything more or less than a son.

Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam were comrades, and while he and Vietnam had their tensions, they were still allies, and the former

two were friendly countries.

But they weren't North. He wouldn't fall asleep looking at the stars with them. And he wouldn't have left his country during a war to shelter with them either, no matter how strategic it was.

China had used to have more friends. His Chairman, his human comrades, Yugoslavia, Albania, and a fair number of the Countryhumans he had just named. All of them either dead or no longer someone he could afford to apply the label to, for the sake of his mask.

North was his only real friend left. Had been.

Y/N was staring at him again. He had let his mask slip.

"Why is North Korean alcohol so sweet?" he said lightly, examining the can of soju, not seeing the letters on it at all.

All he could see was the look on Korea's two-eyed face as he had cringed away from him.

"Hey, China?" Y/N said, and her voice was soft and awkward. "I'm sorry for calling you heartless that one time."

He couldn't blame her. It was only what he wanted her to think, after all.

"You shouldn't be- I *am* heartless." Slipping, and not just his words from the alcohol. "I don't even remember you saying that."

She blinked at him, sadly and pityingly, and he knew that she was seeing through him as easily as he saw through her.

"Drink more." He suddenly tipped her can into her face, the liquid missing her mouth and running down her chin.

"Hey!" the woman protested, and wasted no time in snatching China's half-empty can from the table and splashing it at him, not even aiming for his mouth.

China was admittedly surprised, as he had been when she had

grabbed him at the mosque. It was good to know that his friend hadn't been attracted to the wilting flower type.

He stared at her, cracking his eyes a slit to examine her.

She was glaring at him, soju dripping down her pretty chin and over her nightshirt. There was still that sadness in her eyes, a genuine one, not masked by her indignance.

China supposed it was good that she really loved North. Of course she did, just like of course the people of China had loved their Chairman and cried when he had died, mourning, just as China had, though more openly allowed.

The only reason he hadn't blown her cover to North when he had first met her had been for his friend's sake. If he knew that he had let a possible American spy into his household, and then later his heart, it would have only exacerbated his trust issues, made him even more prickly and paranoid. It couldn't be done without proof.

So China had gathered his information, his secretly taken pictures of America and one of the many pretty women he was always with. The quiet girl at his side in rare news reports, wearing heavy make-up and a fake smile. The whispers about bruises and crying and bloodstained sheets that could be heard from certain staff members at the White House. He had always told North it was amazing what money could get you.

He had decided she had reason enough to defect from America, and at that point, North had been smitten with her. So if she were to be a spy, China had decided he would simply remove her in a way that looked accidental, leaving his friend's heart broken, but not his trust.

Of course that was before America had seen her at his side, and North's ignorance would no longer be a protection, but a danger.

She wasn't a spy, though. China was even better at reading emotions than he was at portraying them. And Y/N was heartbroken.

Of course she had loved North. Why wouldn't she?

He wanted to cry right now, but an actor never let their mask match their true feelings, so he laughed instead, doubling over so that she wouldn't see the desperate pain that flashed across his eyes before he closed them. She started to laugh, too, her manic hurt even more audible than his.

It was his fault they were hurting right now. He should have known not to go, even if he had to.

"There's that spark," China managed after his fit of grieved laughter had mellowed. "You're feisty."

"Isn't that a word to describe, like, a racehorse?" Y/N asked, slurring her words, already drunker than him.

"Mm." He nodded, trying to shove aside his guilt and grief and just stop thinking for once. "Or one of those horrible, yapping dogs."

"A chihuahua?"

"Exactly!" China cheered exuberantly, and his drink sloshed on his friend's table. "You're a chihuahua!"

Y/N started to giggle uncontrollably, and he snorted, amused by both her and the fact that somehow his serious friend had ended up with someone who giggled. Then again, North wasn't quite so serious as he pretended. He had bit him once, after all.

He snorted, then finally got the pain he had been wishing for as the soju went somewhere it shouldn't.

"Oh, fuck," he choked, aggressively trying to get the alcohol out of his nasal passage. "I think I just got soju up my nose."

Y/N straightened, looking mock sober. "China. You don't have a nose."

He didn't, and that was suddenly the funniest thing in the world, making him double over again, howling.

He had only ever drank to excess with his Chairman. North didn't like the unpredictability of drunk people, so China only ever pretended around him, something that he was fairly certain North had figured out.

He and his Xiao Zedong would occasionally break out a bottle on celebrations, and drink until they were both roaring with laughter, singing songs that people had written for and about them, reminiscing about battles and comrades and victory.

Maybe that was why he asked Y/N, "Do you want to learn some marching songs?"

She had an awful voice, but right now, so did he. They were slurring their words, the Mandarin and Cantonese that she tried to parrot back to him turning to mush in her mouth. China threw her a bone by adding in Korean translations of songs, but North's dialect was different than that of the one he spoke, and it didn't help at all.

Y/N sang a few scraps of *'Aegukka,'* North's anthem, and it made China think of South Hamgyong, and her belting out the song to an audience during the war, face wild and near rapturous.

And how did the provinces feel about their new Korea? It had been what they always wanted, just as it had been what North had always wanted. But the reality was different than the expectation, especially when he was not Korea, but Soviet Korea. Surely SH would be disappointed in China. His one chance to make up for abandoning North when he had needed him, and he hadn't been there.

He was laughing because he still wanted to cry. The provinces were above them, and Korea. Was he sleeping soundly or lying awake, plagued by thoughts of who he had been? Surely North couldn't bear to know the full extent of what his brother had done, to have it as his.

China wanted out.

"We should go outside," he suggested to Y/N. "Hit some bars."

"We're in the midd- in the the middle of a war," she slurred. "Are they open this late?"

No. And his friend had directed that no new alcohol would be produced until the war was over, directing all precious grains towards rations to keep his people fed. So responsible and considerate, unlike his brother. China wondered if he would keep that order standing or try to repeal it now.

He grinned at Y/N. "We could always break in. Free alcohol."

"Korea would k-kill us," she hiccuped. "Let'sh do it."

Even if they didn't, they could breathe fresh air and be away from the person they loved who was no longer quite that person.

"Let me finish my drink," China told her, starting to sing again, trying to push away the ache in his insides. "Without the Communist Party, there would be no new China~"

Y/N joined in, trying to do the same.

As they butchered his song, the door slammed open, and a stake of grief stabbed though China's heart.

It was Korea, standing in the doorway. Now he had a North-like expression on his face, though the two eyes still gave him away.

"What are you two doing?" he demanded.

China looked at Y/N, and the look of shock and hurt was so clear on her face, matching his inner feelings, that it made him laugh again, howling unrepentantly. He set her off, and they were both hunched over and cackling again.

Korea was watching them with a look that was at once wary and hurt. North had always looked like the first when people laughed at things he didn't understand. But he had never been hurt. He didn't care if he was missing out on something, he only cared about knowing if the joke was on him.

Still, he looked enough like his friend that China calmed himself

with an effort, sprawling back on his cushion throne with his soju in hand.

"Having a pity party," he informed him, pouring the alcohol into his mouth from on high. Most of it missed, pouring over his already damp changshan. "Oops."

"And we're plan-planning a robbery," Y/N said, giggly in a way that was mostly amused, but partly nervous.

"That too." China pointed at her, then aggressively at Korea. "And what are *you* doing?"

Why had he come downstairs? To talk to him? Had he known China would be down here? Or had he come for Y/N?

"Trying to sleep," he said, disappointingly.

"Boo," Y/N cried through cupped hands, noticing what China had. "No way you can hearsh- hear usss from the top floor."

"Good observation skills," China praised, trying to high-five her. But she was doubling in front of him, and he aimed for the wrong woman. They both missed, and she fell on him, not getting back up.

"I came to get a drink," Korea said, crossing his arms defensively. "Which is what it looks like you've been doing."

North had often lied like that. 'I just came to get a drink.' Then he would sit at the table with it, letting it give him an excuse to return to the dining room, so his provinces wouldn't see him choosing to sleep on the floor with China. And later, just the excuse to sit and talk for longer.

China did not get the sense that he was lying now.

"Noooooo," Y/N said, her weight warm and heavy. "You think?"

"He has even better observational skills than you," China noted, leaning back farther in the soft cushions.

He wouldn't mind sleeping down here with her. Far away from

CCCP, who had cast him that sympathetic look in the car, with someone instead of alone. He doubted Korea would allow it, though.

Sure enough, he growled, "That's it- get up," and stomped over to them.

It would have been comforting to know he could still predict him, if China didn't know that it was South's real mistrust of him that didn't want him around Y/N.

"Come on," the other country ordered, hauling them both up by the arms. "You're going to sleep."

"Aw," Y/N complained as Korea hauled them out the door. "Bo-*ring."*

"Seriously," China agreed. "You got a new personality, but you're still a killjoy."

He wanted to touch him, so he did, poking his cheek with a finger. At least the flag hadn't changed. Hopefully CCCP wouldn't do something about that. Korea twitched away.

"I thought that South was supposed to be a party-animal," he added, heart hurting.

He knew he was. Drugs, women, loud music, and alcohol, all things that North hated. Well, not women. But using them.

China would be fine with two of those things in moderation, but he couldn't bear the others. He knew North couldn't bear any of them.

He gazed at his friend, and saw a flicker in his eyes. If he was thinking the same thing as China, he made no other sign of it.

"No one is a party-animal at two in the morning," he grunted.

"We are," Y/N sing-songed, adding a fake 'woof.'

Her weight against Korea's other side pressed him into China. The

Korean twitched again, though he couldn't move away without dropping China, something the Chinese country was gratified he didn't do. Or would have been, if North wouldn't have definitely dropped him. Carry him across Korea, yes. Carry him up to bed? No.

China *'mao'*ed back to Y/N, and she returned it with a fairly convincing 'neigh.' They continued to make animal noises at each other as Korea tried to get them into the elevator.

China didn't want to. He didn't want to be in a small, quiet space with his friend, to give him a chance to step away again.

"Noooo," he slurred, weakly trying to turn them towards the staircase. "The stairssssss."

"I would rather throw myself into traffic than try to lug you two drunks up those stairs," Korea hissed, successfully getting them into the lift and closing the doors.

"You're the one who drove us to drink," Y/N said, almost falling. There was a mournful edge under her carelessness, something hurt.

"Yeah," China agreed, a part of him wanting to lash out at the half of Korea that had made his friend look at him in terror.

Then he saw the flash of pain in his friend's eyes, and changed his mind.

"The North that we know would have threatened to throw us down the stairs," he sighed, leaning on him, trying to comfort him for their words. He didn't mean to say the next ones out loud, desperately trying to catch his mask, but missing.

"You've changed."

He hoped he hadn't. He hoped he was still a Marxist, that he still put his people before anything, that he wasn't like his scared, boring brother, that he still loved China.

Korea's eyes flashed again. "Really?" he growled angrily. "I hadn't noticed."

It wasn't just that the voice he had used that sounded exactly like North's. It was the way the pain had flickered across his eyes again before he said them. China's words had hurt him, just like Y/N's had, and he was lashing out, like he always did.

For one second, he saw his friend as he had used to be, and his mask slipped fully off. As the elevator reached his floor, China grabbed North and pressed a kiss to his striped cheek.

It was a relief to do it, in a way. Even though he wasn't really North. He was still his friend.

And for a moment, he could have sworn he leaned into it, unconsciously.

Then Korea's eyes widened in disgust, and he pushed China away, hard, sending him reeling from the elevator. His head spun, and he didn't do much to stop himself from hitting the ground, laughing giddily.

"I will *kill* you if you do that again!" Korea snarled as the doors slid shut.

China caught his eye through the closing crack, and smiled.

Then the elevator was gone, rising up and away from him.

China sighed, letting his upper half join his legs on the floor, staring at the ceiling, watching it spin as he wiped water from his eyes.

There were so many things he had never said to North when he was just North, and now never could. But he knew he never could have anyway. Some things couldn't be said. And shouldn't.

His last words had been so insignificant. North had driven him to the airport, then stared at him, like he did when he had something that he couldn't say.

'Fight well,' he had said eventually, uncomfortable as he held words back.

'Don't worry,' China had hummed, smiling, and unaware that it would be the last time he saw him where he was just him. *'I'll be safe. You know you can't get rid of me that easily.'*

He had to go, he knew he had. Because his country was more important than anything, just like North's was to him. Another necessary regret, the newest in a long, long line.

Sometimes he wished his mask were real.

He didn't care about the heavy footsteps marching down the hall towards him. It was too late to hide, anyway.

"Son," CCCP said, blocking the ceiling light as he looked down at him.

"Baba," China answered, with enough of an inflection that he knew it was insincere. He could still act that well, at least.

The Soviet raised a thick brow. "Would you like a hand?"

"If I wanted to stand, I would." China closed his eyes, for real.

"You are upset over Korea."

The Chinese man laughed bitterly. "Did you become an empath when you rose from the ashes like a phoenix?"

"No." There was the sound of the large man squatting next to him. "I only know you."

"I bet *you're* pleased, at least."

CCCP sighed. "I never wanted it like this, son. You know that."

"Do I?" China knew. CCCP was overly controlling and overbearing. But only if you accepted it.

"It was the only way," the Soviet said, and there was grief in his voice. "If I had not accepted him into the Soviet Union, he would have faded away completely. And Korea would have fallen."

"North never believed that," China informed him. His overly optimistic friend, sneaking away like he had during the war. "His country is special, you know."

But CCCP was right. If he hadn't Reunified North and his brother as a Soviet Republic, then a new Unified Korea would have been born, one that would not have been dominated by North. One that would not have been China's friend at all, though he still would have watched over his people, for North's sake.

"I know," CCCP said softly, and a large hand was placed on China's head, gently rubbing it. "Do not fear. He is not so changed."

"But he *is* changed."

"Everything and everyone changes."

China knew. Change was a Communist principle. Always progressing, always moving forward. He knew and it hurt. It always did.

"You should have seen his speech," CCCP continued. "He is still our North."

"He hissed at me," China said, aware that he sounded like he was whining. "You saw him in the car."

CCCP nodded. "I did. Give him time. This is difficult for all of us."

But less difficult for CCCP, with his shiny new republic.

"Be gentle with him," the Soviet added.

"I'm not the one who owns him now."

CCCP gave him a disapproving look. "I do not own Korea. He is one of my republics. When the war is over, he will be allowed to vote to leave me just as the others will."

"Giving you plenty of time to make sure he doesn't want to."

North had never let anyone influence him. But South had been

weak-willed with no real morals or desires but his own indulgences, letting America groom him into the perfect little puppet state. And Korea had trailed the Soviet from the car earlier, casting uncertain glances at China.

CCCP shook his head. "It would not be possible even if I desire to. Which I do not. The version of me you have invented never existed." He tilted his head down at him, sorrow in his eyes. "Do you still resent me so much, son?"

China sighed, closing his eyes. "No. Take me to bed."

The Soviet smiled slightly. "Do you want to sleep in my room?"

"Yes," he admitted, keeping his eyes closed. "But take me to mine."

He let CCCP lift him in his muscular arms, draped across them like a limp noodle before he switched to cradling him, taking him down the hall and into the room China always used when he was here. North never gave it to anyone else, and it had a picture of Mao Zedong in it, in a place of honour next to his friend's Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

Though China always straightened it when he visited, somehow it was always crooked when he next came back.

He let CCCP place him on the futon, then ordered, "Take my changshan off. It's wet."

"I thought that was alcohol I smelled." The Soviet complied, removing China's upper clothing while he made absolutely no effort to make things easier for him.

"'ssssoju," he slurred. "'ssssweet."

"I am sure," CCCP said, folding his sticky changshan and placing it on the dresser, then returning to tuck him under the covers, pulling them tightly up to his chin, making China feel like he was on his sickbed.

When he was done, he patted his forehead. "Tomorrow I will find

you the recording of Korea's Reunification speech. You will see. He has not changed." He cupped his cheek, and smiled. "Neither have you."

China pretended he was asleep so he wouldn't have to answer, waiting until CCCP left, quietly shutting off the light.

He knew his friend wasn't dead. He knew he wasn't gone or lost. He knew Korea was still North.

But he *had* changed. And what if he had changed too much? China knew he was difficult to get along with. His provinces told him enough. He did it on purpose. Or he exacerbated it on purpose because he was genuinely hard to get along with, and it made him feel better to be intentional about it.

But North loved him. China was his best friend, like he was China's. They were both difficult to get along with- obsessive, driven, and uncaring about what others thought about them.

South hadn't been like that. He was self-conscious, unprincipled, and selfish. He simpered when China was forced to spend time with him, wanting better trade deals or goods or a fancy guest gift, even though the Chinese country was fully aware the South Korean both hated and feared him.

North had never wanted anything. He had needed things, and China had given him plenty because he loved giving to his people. But he had never wanted any of it.

If his friend looked at him with that needy, helpless look, China wouldn't be able to stand it. It would mean he really wasn't Chaoxian anymore.

The footsteps in the hall were light and familiar. He froze, hearing them stop outside his door. They stayed there for more than five minutes, China breathing lightly.

The knock, when it came, was hesitant. The door creaked open before China could say anything.

Korea stood in the hall lights, silhouetted in the doorframe. He

stared at him like a deer in headlights, as if China had just barged into *his* room (which he did frequently do).

The Chinese country stared back at him, not daring to swallow. He waited patiently, until he sensed that if he was quiet for any longer, the other country would bolt.

"Did you get Y/N to bed without her breaking her neck?" he asked, trying to keep the slur out of his voice.

"...Yeah," Korea muttered, not meeting his eyes.

He was silent again. China took the opportunity to stare at him. He still looked almost exactly like North. Angled black brows, thin lips, a strong jaw, blue, red, and white stripes. Even his eyes were still sharp and slanted. The only difference was that he had two of them, and looked more uncertain than North usually did.

And he was missing the adorable little line between his eyebrows that came from glaring so much.

"Something I can help you with?" China managed after another long moment.

Korea quickly looked away, looking down and sideways as he rubbed his arm. The motion, the little sign of awkwardness, was new, one of South's nervous tics. But the way he looked out the corner of his eye at him, apologetic, but not going to say anything, was purely North. It made China's heart twang.

"I just... wanted to make sure you made it to your room."

China surreptitiously swallowed. "I did." He wouldn't tell him about CCCP carrying him, or their little discussion. North hated when people talked about him behind his back.

"Good," Korea said, then quieted again.

There were so many things China wanted to say to him. *'Tell me you haven't changed, tell me you're still a Marxist, tell me you'll still do anything for your country and your people are more important than anything. Tell me I'm still your friend. I-'*

But he couldn't. China may be able to talk circles around anyone, and North may have been able to rouse people to fury or euphoria with his speeches, but neither of them had ever been good at saying things honestly to the people around them, just like when they had discussed the prospect of the Reunification.

'I'll change.'

'En.'

'I'll be like... him.'

China had wondered if he were talking about Israel-Palestine or his brother. Maybe both.

'You won't be.'

'If I am, promise...' A swallow, and his friend seemed to give up on what he had been going to say. *'Promise you'll take care of Y/N. Keep her safe.'*

'I promise.' Because it meant something that he had asked, and empty assurances were never enough for either of them.

And then China had given up on what *he* had been going to say, and after a moment, North had walked away.

Honesty was for fools and those with nothing to lose. And they were neither of those things.

But Korea was giving him that apologetic look, and China could try sincerity again.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

Korea furrowed his brow. "For what?" he asked warily.

China closed his eyes. "...For encouraging your girlfriend to break and enter."

He couldn't do it. His mask had slipped earlier, but it was back. He couldn't take it off. They hadn't won yet. The war was still going

on, America was still out there. It wouldn't be over until he was dead. And then maybe, China could finally stop performing. Maybe he and Korea could talk honestly. Though he doubted it. They were too similar. He hoped they still were.

"China."

"En?" China cracked an eye.

Korea blinked, then squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing. His left eye opened, mirroring China's look, and he forced through gritted teeth, "I'm..."

China sat up, hope surging in his chest.

The other man suddenly straightened, face flattening. "...going to sleep."

The Chinese country smiled. "That's what you wanted to tell me so seriously?"

"Yes," Korea said flatly, turning militarily on a heel. He spun back. "No. I wanted to tell you I meant that earlier. If you ever kiss me again, I'm *ending* you."

China laughed, delighted. "You're going to have your forehead wrinkle back in no time."

His friend touched the space between his eyes, then glowered again. "I hate you."

Maybe a part of him did, the part that was scared little South. But he didn't sound like he meant it.

"You love me," China said softly, smiling with teeth. "Do you want to sleep in here tonight?"

Korea grimaced, as he had known he would. "If I'm not sleeping with my- with my girlfriend, I'm not sleeping with *you."*

He stepped out of the room.

"Goodnight, Chaoxian," China called, heart aching a little less.

Korea locked eyes with him through the crack in the door, then slammed it.

China listened to him stand outside the door for another minute, mutter, "Idiot," then leave. He didn't come back, though the Chinese man wouldn't have expected him to.

China flopped back down, smiling.

His friend was still in there, it seemed. China would have to test him, watch carefully. He wanted to watch that video of his speech right now, and itched to head to CCCP's room.

But he wouldn't. He would watch it sober, to make sure it really was his Chaoxian in it.

He hadn't been able to protect his friend, like he had promised himself he would. He hadn't been able to help safeguard his Reunification.

But it had been *North's* Reunification. It had been his decision, as CCCP said. And the Soviet was not a good liar. North had won and South had lost, as China had always known would happen.

He couldn't turn back time to protect him. Communists could only move forwards. And he would.

China was obsessive and driven, and when he found someone who could actually get along with him, he did not let them go. If Korea wasn't his Chaoxian, he *would* be. Just like the Korean had wanted to request of him when they had spoken before.

He had never wanted anything from him, but right now, he did need something.

This time, China would be there for his friend.

New chapter of book- WRONG. Unasked for China POV.

Star-gazing

[image]

North and China in the late 80's. I'm not sure if they kept the whole Tower of the Juche Ideal lit up back then, or just the torch. But I wanted to draw it all lit up, so I did.

Another dream. So I was in the small town I live in real life. And I was some sort of political figure. Mayor, perhaps. There was this old man hunting me, and I called CCCP to deal with him. I was close friends with the Countryhumans in this dream. So I was running through the streets after them, and I reach a crossroads near my house. CCCP isn't there, but the old man is, and an old woman. I knew the old woman, she had been an American pilot in the Fatherland Liberation War, and had defected to the DPRK. At the age of seven, my dream knowledge told me. Very skilled child pilot. Her name was Sarah, and she was having a confrontation with this man, and during it I pulled up his Wikipedia page (bad source) and was reading it while he pointed a gun at her and she yelled. So this guy was her copilot who defected to the North with her, and married her (once she was no longer seven) but after several years there, he tried to access this vent in a backroom in a factory, and after getting caught, fled. According to Wikipedia, his mother had actually been in Korea during the Occupation, working for Japan (even though she was American). She had tried to access this same vent before she was shot dead in the room. It was *supposedly* a suicide. So there seems to be an anti-Korea conspiracy involving this vent. And at that point I asked (looking up from my phone as this couple was having a dramatic, tearful confrontation) 'Did anyone ever open that vent to check what was in there?' and they were like, 'No, not to our knowledge.' And I was briefly possessed by the spirit of North who was like 'Why the *fuck* didn't we look in there?? Obviously no one would look during the Occupation, but why didn't we look in there after?' So after her husband fled, Sarah went on a world quest to find and bring him to justice. Why was she looking in small town Japan? Unknown, but apparently it was the right place. The guy didn't even care about

killing me anymore, but he was yelling that he had never wanted to betray the DPRK, but there were bigger things going on, and his family was in danger from some unknown force, and in the end Sarah was like, 'I love you. Come back with me, we can clear this all up. Whoever is after you, we'll protect you.' And he started crying, and put down the gun, and they embraced. But then. He was shot twice in the spine and head, and he fell to the road. Sarah was distraught, I felt nothing, and just thought 'Thanks CCCP.' No sympathy for traitors, I guess. Or guys trying to shoot me. Also, 'I never wanted to betray the DPRK.' Okay. But you *did* want to kill me?? Sarah and I were not taking cover, just standing in the open. She was crying, and I pulled out my phone and called emergency services. Completely nonchalant. 'Dead guy at (road) and-' *wanders over to road sign, squints* '-(road). He got shot twice. He's already dead. No need to hurry.' Then for no reason, I put on this sly, evil politician voice, and said, 'By the way, this is (full name).' I paused to let her absorb that information. 'CCCP was the one who shot this man, because he was trying to kill me. And I am... intimately connected with several important Countryhumans. Just so you're aware.' Then a horde of zombies(?) came around the corner, and I said 'Yabai,' then hung up the phone like I was someone very unhelpful in a horror movie. Then Sarah and I ran, and I ended up beating up some girls I used to know, then I woke up.

Many things to question, but my main one is, why did I suddenly decide to use nepotism to get out of charges? I wouldn't have been charged. I had witnesses who knew the man was trying to kill me, and I had a witness that saw I didn't shoot him. I just decided to be a corrupt small town politician for no reason. Also, I don't think CCCP shot the guy. I think him disappearing is suspicious, and the fact that we never saw the shooter was, too, and was connected to the anti-Korea conspiracy. So I think I just offered him up like a sacrificial cow, then used his status to get myself out of trouble. Trouble that I would not have even been in. My two favourite things in dreams are when I'm so definitely me (crying at Kim Il-sung's speech that I can't even understand), and when I'm me, but absolutely not (corrupt mayor who doesn't feel anything). Because I can say confidently in real life I would be sobbing disgustingly as the old man and Sarah embraced. And him dying after that would *wreck* me.

Men In Skirts

[image]

[image]

[image] [image]

[image]

As requested- North Hamgyong in a skirt! When you said pink skirt and heels with ribbons, obviously you meant Madoka Kaname's outfit.

I am at my parent's house, and I love seeing them interact with my cat. I have matching тельняшки with him (тель-ня-шки hehe), and mother keeps making him wear it. He hates it so he just flops to the floor. I pretend he's a army soldier so I call him Товарищ Персик (Comrade Peach), and father just calls him Товарищ. 'Comrade, it is time for breakfast. Comrade, you cannot go outside.' They love my boy, but unfortunately my boy is afraid of them like he is afraid of everyone. They are frightening and he does not know why I have kidnapped him to a different place. But I will not lose him to the sea.

Do Not Separate

[image] [image]

Little creatures <3

I'm so excited for Dragon Age and going back to the DPRK that last night my dream was a mix of playing Dragon Age (but it was really weird, there were talking buff horses on motorcycles), and going to the DPRK. Except Japan was a part of the Peninsula, on the far south end, so my friend and I had to drive through South Korea to reach the North. But my friend was driving, so she took us on a detour, we got boba, then she started terrorizing the South Koreans by driving over places she wasn't supposed to, sipping boba with one hand, driving directly at civilians with the other (in character for her). I was apparently uncaring to the chaos she was causing, I just remember saying, 'This is nice, but can we go to the DPRK now?' as she spun the car in circles outside what I think was the city hall in Seoul (though it looked nothing like it). I woke up with the urge to take responsibility for her by apologizing.

Clingy

[image] [image]

When Hae sleeps in his room, Korea wakes up and quickly scrambles away from her while she remains sleeping, irritated that he's so subconsciously clingy now, but relieved that Hae is oblivious to it. Unbeknownst to him, Hae is completely aware because she wakes up in the middle of the night from dreams that she is drowning. It's very hard for her not to vibrate in place from excitement, but she manages. If Korea were to start sleeping on the kitchen floor with China again (which he eventually would), China would be ecstatic to learn about his friend's new trait. While Korea would start planning a murder.

I have tentatively returned home with my things (cat). Guess what happened a day after. ANOTHER EARTHQUAKE. No tsunami warning so it is acceptable. But sometimes it does feel like I am being targeted.

More Little Creatures

[image] [image] [image]
[image]

The rest of them <3 I gave Gangwon the flower flag he would have with North because I'll say it- the South Korean provinces have atrocious designs for their flags. Why make province flags if you're not going to make them pretty? Most have white bases, too, which is boring from a character design stance.

Another strange dream. So Kim Jong-un was staying in my house. This was not a big deal because he was a family friend. I was also hosting the 'American DNC' in my house in a giant assembly hall that is definitely not a part of my house in real life. Also I don't think the American DNC is what it was in my dream either. It was a debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. I don't know why it was in Japan. Security reasons? Trump was staying in my house, too. He wasn't a family friend, I guess I just thought he needed a place to stay. Also Kim Jong-un wasn't in my house for the American DNC, he was just there to visit, along with our mutual friend Ivanka (not Donald Trump's daughter, my dream logic made a point of mentioning she was Russian) and her son. My house is not big enough to hold all those people, let alone the entire American DNC. Donald Trump kept trying to harass Kim Jong-un, who was staying in my guest bedroom (that I don't have), while he was staying in my bedroom (I would not let Donald Trump sleep in my room). A highlight was when he was trying to video call Kim Jong-un, while I stood in the hallway having a conversation with him about Imperialism and how both American parties are the same. Kim Jong-un was on a laptop, declining Trump's calls, then Trump stormed out of my room and into the guest bedroom (that I still don't have) and was yelling things like 'I can see you on your laptop, I know you're declining my calls!' and Kim Jong-un was simply refusing to speak to him, just giving me 'Can you believe this guy?' looks while I raised my eyebrows in agreement. So at one point I was in the assembly hall, surrounded by Americans, and I was idly thinking 'Should I cheer for Mister Trump? He is staying in

my house, it would be polite. And I'm not voting, so it doesn't matter.' Then a bunch of protestors started chanting 'End the genocide!' at Kamala Harris, and she and the democrats did that thing they do in real life where they cover the ears, and I was like, 'Okay, I guess I *will* cheer for Mister Trump.' Which probably is the thought pattern of many American voters right now, unaware or unaccepting of the fact that Kamala Harris and Donald Trump are the exact same people with the exact same policies, no matter how much they lie. So I was unreasonably hyped to yell 'Ganbatte Mister President!' but before I could, Kim Jong-un came down to get me (casting an unimpressed look at the American DNC), and informed me that our mutual friend Ivanka and her son had gone missing, and he wanted me to find them. He couldn't leave my house for security reasons. Not sure how secure my house was with the entire American DNC in it, but I digress. So I went looking for her, but I also wasn't leaving the house (also for security reasons?) so I was just wandering around looking for a woman and her child in closets and cupboards (that I also do not have). Eventually the American DNC ended, Trump went home, Kim Jong-un also went home, and my friend and her family came to visit. I was still really stressed about Ivanka and her son, and my friend's grandmother offered to go file a missing person report for me (guess I really couldn't leave the house). I was saying 'She's been gone the entire day, and Kim Jong-un-dongji tasked me with this, can you please go now?' but she just laughed and said we should have dinner first. So I was having a dinner with my friend and her whole family in my huge kitchen (also don't have), while I was having awful stress over my missing friend and her child. At one point my friend grabbed me, sat me on her lap because I was pacing, and shoved grilled fish in my mouth, telling me to relax. It was really dry, but I like dry fish so that wasn't the problem. Eventually her uncle left, and her grandmother finally started (slowly) to prepare to go inform the police of my missing friend. I remember looking out the window and seeing that my friend's uncle had four huge flags attached to his truck (which was one of those huge American trucks)- the Ukrainian flag, the American flag, the Slovakian flag, and a fourth flag I can't remember. It wasn't the Japanese flag, because I remember the fact that he didn't have one annoying me. I also vividly remember telling her her uncle had an itatorakku. I don't know what I had against Slovakia, but my disgust was definitely

directed at that flag, too. I never found Ivanka. Sorry Ivanka. Kishida had no mention in my dream, likely because he knew stepping foot in my house would be unwise.

Worker's Party Official's Blessing?

[image]

Ahem. Don't think too deeply about the character choice. I just wanted to draw them in Hua Cheng and Xie Lian's clothes. Technically China should have the eye patch, but I feel that North should be Xie Lian, since he has the whole Taoist thing going on (no alcohol, no sex, etcetera).

One of my favourite stories, I really need to watch the donghua. I think my favourite moment was when Xie Lian started asking questions out loud to himself, then once the random stranger (San Lang <3) answered them, he proceeded to interrogate him, invite him home, then sleep in bed with him. Me.

Edit: By Talos... South as Qi Rong... Russia as Pei Ming... Nipponia as Shi Qingxuan...

Another edit: Also also the scene where Xie Lian is like 'You can stab me, it's okay, I won't die,' and he's ready to let the people basically torture him so they'll survive is so North. Like, *really* North. You'll see.

Chibi CCCP

[image] [image]
[image]

As requested! Thinking about lemon cupcakes now.

CCCP in a suit was requested awhile ago. I did a Stalin-style suit because I am always thinking of him *opens my little heart-shaped locket and it's that picture of Comrade Stalin in a bunny suit* I've never bothered to find out if that's edited, because it harms no one if I believe it's real, but it does harm me if I find out it's not.

And Chagang in a suit was also requested. They're talking about The Economy, I think.

Another dream. I can't remember much of it, but my mother went crazy and hired an army (of just regular people) to kill me, and I had to beat off a crazed horde of unarmed civilians. And after I was sitting in a field of corpses and Comrade Kim Jong-un just strolled up to give me a motivational speech. I can't remember what he said, but it was something about not being responsible for other's opinions of us (my insane mother, I assume he meant) and to keep my (blood-soaked) head up. Very wise. He's been showing up very often in my dreams lately. Still no Comrade Kim Jong-il, though.

Also the next chapter is taking so long because I don't know how to read maps. It's coming, I promise. Once I consult the maps a few... hundred more times.

Human Form

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Once again! I can't draw people. I'm aware. Don't bully me or I'll frown angrily at my screen for a few seconds before moving on.

I will always stick to drawing them as creatures, because I like them that way better. More fun. Andicantdrawhumans. If you want to draw them (but better) you definitely can.

Evey time you look up a trip to China, it tells you- 'want to go somewhere less crowded for the Mid-Autumn Festival? Try The Road of Death! Come on, don't you want to visit The Road of Death? It's fun! Why is it called The Road of Death? Come visit and find out!' Yeah, sure, I would love to go to The Road of Death. Why not?

Crossdressing!

[image] [image]

Boyfriends are for dress-up.

Also I feel from the dismayed reactions I have to clarify- the sausage joke is about when you stuff a sausage but put too much filling in the intestine and it bursts. Because Russia is bursting out of his clothes. I am... now seeing how that could mean something else. But it was not intended. Oops.

There's this specific tour I want to go on, but it's almost a year away. I don't want to wait that long. BUT I absolutely do not have enough money for two trips. Or I sort of do. I'm good at saving, and father always took us on budget tours on little money, but I hate spending if I don't have to. And if I do have to. I don't eat expired food out of desire. And what if the borders close again because of that monkeypox? I don't want to go on one of the first tours once they reopen because I want to give the people and tour companies time to readjust. But I do want to go soon. But I think I would have to get a double entry visa for China twice then, so I could do the tour I want to do. Unless I timed it really well. I know there is the ability to visit China for a certain amount of time for the purpose of travelling to other countries, which I think I did with father. But the idea of doing that alone scares me because there are stipulations and if I ever accidentally broke one and got in trouble in a foreign country I would have to kill myself in front of the police out of shame. I would rather just get a proper visa so I don't have to feel more fear than I usually do. And I *really* want to properly visit China. I want to see the giant hammer and sickle in Shaanxi and point at it with my mouth open. Father is offering to help me (I don't do well with forms and contacting people and applying for things; I feel like I will fill something out wrong and be executed. Yes, actually, I do think gallivanting off to foreign countries alone for a month is good for me. It's called shock therapy.), but I will not

take it. I will do this alone. I just have to decide *what* I do alone. There is that saying about being the wealthiest person in the cemetery, but I will *end up* in the cemetery if I don't pay rent. From being homeless, not from the landlord killing me. I would never let a landlord win. Scum of the earth. Much to consider.

Bodyswap!

[image]
[image]

How did this happen? That thing that suspicious doujin do where the eccentric character did something strange off-page. So 'Japan did it' could work.

China says something menacing like 'I'm off to do shameful things in your body.' But then he just eats a good meal, buys a massage chair to use for a few hours, and gets a full night of sleep. North spends the entire time pulling increasingly large and comical items out of China's sleeves and in the end doesn't learn how they work. But actually North would never let China gallivant around in his body so he just handcuffs them together until it wears off. But then China has the key and he doesn't let North out until he has a meal with him, so he still gets his way.

Vampire Bat

[image]
[image] [image]

Instead of North as a bat, how about a bat that looks suspiciously like North, and a man who is normal and well-adjusted and absolutely isn't sick to his stomach missing his best friend every day because he cut contact with him to fulfill a mysterious purpose that is known only to him. Bats are like cats are like tarantulas are like eels to me. Same creatures.

Friend showed me a picture of a baby hippo. Those things have to be edible, right? Big ones are pretty much all muscle on top, but they must have fat under there somewhere. And the little ones look so soft. Has to be like veal, I think. They're sooooo cute, but when she was showing me all I could think was 'miso-gochujang rub... maple wood smoked... low and slow...' That is a roast pork.

Pokemon Teams

This is inspired by a conversation hehe. Every Pokemon I think the main characters of my books would have. This is something that people won't care about, but that I put too much thought into not to post.
Going through all the Pokemon I know and realizing that I knew too many from memory. It was kind of neat to realize how many I had the Japanese default for from games I played when young, to the ones I know in English from the games in Canada (most of them, sigh). Even though I played more in English, I still think 'Eneko' before 'Skitty.' I made sure they're all English here for consistency.

Also because I can't turn the Communist off ever- Nintendo has shut down its services in Russia, but still has a store in 'Israel.' Interesting. Remember, pirating games may be 'illegal,' but it's not *wrong*.

North: Aggron- Aggressive, strong, high defense, surprisingly environmentally conscious, could be used to protect your country or work in a steel factory. Also, Pulgasari.
Typhlosion- Portable fire is useful. Plus it has explosive anger, like him.
Umbreon- I think it just suits him. It walked into his high-rise as an Eevee and curled up on the floor and wouldn't leave. Typical cat behaviour. He insists he hates it, but oops! Umbreon evolves with high friendship. Get a better lie.
Tyranitar- North would make some argument that it's strong and can be used for landscaping. But that's not it. He has it because it also reminds him of Pulgasari.
Keldeo- Kirin.
Salamence- It wished it could fly so badly that it grew wings. I think that suits North well. Plus it's like a sentient fighter jet.

SH: Altaria- beautiful and gentle, but still a Dragon type. A singer and dancer that's caring to its friends, but merciless to its enemies,

like SH.
Mareep- constant supply of wool for making clothes. Cute.
Swellow- sort of like a goshawk, and can be used to send messages. Plus it can sing while she paints.
Glameow- I just think it has SH vibes. Cinccino- Fashionable, cute. South Pyongan would constantly try to steal its fur oil to sell to foreigners.
Corviknight- One of these things is not like the other. She can use it to travel quickly, or shred people with steel feathers. Truly multi-purpose.

North Hamgyong: Mightyena- puppy. Mean like him.
Arcanine- puppy. Can be used to transport materials quickly.
Houndoom- puppy. Portable fire.
Manectric- puppy. constant source of electricity
Rockruff- puppy. He wants to evolve it into a midnight form Lycanroc, but it doesn't want to evolve. He'll be able to overcome the puppy eyes someday
Boltund- puppy. Can be used to power machinery.
I was thinking about Zangoose, but I think he would not like the idea of Pokemon walking on two legs. Lycanroc gets a pass because it still looks like a dog.

Hae: Skitty- pink kitty :)
Mew- It sensed her pure heart and came to her. Hwang was like 'You have a Mew?!' and she was like, 'Ayuh! She's pink! Ain't she cute?'
Togepi- happiness and good luck for her and her family! And it's cute.
Sylveon- another pink kitty :) She subtly uses its powers to calm North down when he's stressed.
Miltank- pink cow :) Constant supply of milk for her people.
Mudsdale- useful for the farm.

Hwang: Alakazam- smartest Pokemon for the smartest province. Can be used to file documents, flip pages in books, double-check writing, and much more.
Ampharos- light to read at night to save electricity; can be used to power things (also why don't the Western names use 'dragon' in them when the Eastern ones do? I thought it was just a Japanese/

English difference, but it's not)
Glaceon- It just gives his vibes. Maybe Hae made them both get Eevee and his evolved to this.
Whiscash- can be used to predict earthquakes; easy to keep since it eats anything. Cute.
Porygon- its artificial nature would intrigue him. Plus, can be used to terrorize Japan. Just in case.
Charjabug- Portable electricity source. He also thinks it's cute.
Other contenders: Inteleon, Noctowl, Grumpig

North Pyongan: Dewgong- seal :) He likes seals.
Lapras- can be used to sail around or transport things down the Amnok, and it sings.
Milotic- Pretty. It also calms emotions, like him.
Emporeon- could be used to fight, or to break ice in winter
Floatzel- can be used to save drowning people or hunt fish
Primarina- it sings, like him. Plus it's pretty.
Other contenders: Seaking, Sharpedo (I like this name better, it's so dumb),
Wailord

South Pyongan: Charizard- it's cool and she could fly on it.
Rapidash- Kirin. Plus she could ride on it.
Pyroar (male)- lazy, but can still use devastating fire attacks
Incineroar- wrestling partner
Cinderace- she could play football with it
Blaziken- sparring partner (someone call the Pokemon Protection Services)
Other contenders: Slaking, Arcanine
All of her team knows at least one Fighting type move, and none of them have any non-damaging moves.

Ryanggang: Bellossom- flowers :) Its cheerful appearance can cheer him up! Theoretically.
Sunflora- Sunflower!
Roselia- it has flowers and its scent can put people in a good mood, which is good for him.
Cherrim- all closed up and gloomy until it gets sunlight on it. Then it becomes a pretty pink flower. Like... Ryanggang?
Lilligant- its flower relaxes people, plus it's pretty. Can be used to

help in the fields or garden.
Diggersby- can be used to dig in the fields or on construction sites. Fur can also be used to make clothes for people.
Other contenders: Flabebe, Comfey, Meganium, Beautifly

Kangwon: Vulpix- cute little fox. Could be used to light fires while camping.
Arbok- I just think it suits him. He likes snakes.
Ninetails (Alolan)- Lives in the mountains and guides lost people out. Very protective of nature. Kangwon vibes.
Meganium- it can soothe people's emotions, like Kangwon. Plus it can bring dead plants back to life, useful for conservation and farming efforts.
Blissey- a nurse that can sense sadness and heal it. Can be used in hospitals.
Gogoat- an empath. Can be used to transport materials, explore the mountains, or travel across Korea fast.
Other contenders: Ledian, Furret, Politoed, Stantler

Chagang: Gardevoir- can be used to predict the future. Useful for missile launches. Very calm and noble.
Medicham- useful for training and combat.
Lucario- also useful for training and combat, plus it can read feelings like him.
Mienshao- a good fighter that could be used in the army
Audino- can sense emotions like him. Good for taking care of soldiers
Fennekin- I think he needs a tiny Pokemon that can just sit on his lap.
Other contender: Gallade

China: Dragonair- 1) it's a long. 2) it can control the weather, good for the country and also for someone who can't stand cold or hot. 3) could be used to fly on.
Xatu- it can see both the past and future. So it's kind of like a dialectical materialist. He wants to know what it sees when it looks forwards. Xatu may not be able to change the future, but China can.
Gyarados (shiny)- when the golden carp travels up the waterfall, it becomes a Red dragon. Its rage can burn cities. He likes a challenge.
Liepard- beautiful, sleek, stealthy, a bit of a kleptomaniac. It's

basically him.
Zoroark- master of illusions. Useful for all kinds of 'performances.'
Chienpao- Destruction can't be allowed to run wild- it needs to be tamed. I imagine it would have been causing havoc in the mountains, and he would have been like, 'let *me* handle this,' whereupon he would walk into the peaks alone, then return riding on it.
Other contenders: Meowth, Persian, Ditto Kommo-o

South: Meloetta- basically an idol. He would use her emotional control abilities to cheer himself up and make people who spent time near him happy, so they would want to keep being around him.
Pawmot- cheerful; like a puppy; the electricity could be used for stage performances
Buneary- small, cute, could be used to fight off stalkers. The perfect pet for an idol.
Chatot- it can sing and speak human languages. It makes him a little less lonely to have someone he can vent to that can respond, even if it doesn't understand what either of them are saying.
Vulpix (Alolan)- cute, pretty, exotic. Exactly the sort of pet an idol should have.
Purugly- He wanted a Glameow. He didn't mean to evolve it. When this 43.8 kg cat claims his bed for its own, he has to sleep in one of his guest rooms.
Other contenders- Lumineon, Floette, Dedenne, Cherubi, Luvdisc

CCCP- Ursaring- mother bear. Usually grim-faced, but can be kind. Could be used for forestry purposes.
Kangaskhan- fiercely protective parent; small child
Rhyperior- basically a walking tank. Could be used for combat or mining.
Cubchoo- baby bear
Teddiursa- baby bear
Flareon- a portable heater for when his children are cold. Plus he likes cats.
Other contenders: Rampardos, Persian

Russia: Ursaluna- he wanted an Ursaring like his father. He didn't meant to evolve it, but drunken shenanigans happened. He uses it

to menace people he doesn't want to talk to.
Zangoose- killing machine, can be used to help him hunt
Beartic- ice bear; can be used to freeze water so he doesn't have to go around it. Or to chill his drinks.
Abomasnow- gentle giant. It reminds him of his dad.
Mamoswine- he just thinks it's cool to have a giant mammoth.
Sunflora- he likes sunflowers. Having a smiling one around should be good for the mood. It's not.

Ukraina- Mawile- outwardly cute and innocent. Get too close and it bites viciously. Not as much a victim as you would think.
Seviper- Zangoose's mortal enemy. She and Russia both insist they caught theirs first, and that the other caught theirs just to mess with them. The truth may never be known.
Togetic- it did not appear before her. She hunted it down so that it could spread its joy to her. Instead, her depression is rubbing off on it.
Munna- she uses it to eat her nightmares
Jolteon- spiky, moody, yellow. Could be used to launch needles at people she doesn't like.
Sunflora- her and Russia caught their Sunkern together as kids. It's not enough to brighten her mood, either.
Other contender: Salazzle

Krim: Teddiursa- CCCP got Russia a Teddiursa, so he got one for Krim.
Eevee- every girl needs a cute little cat(?) thing.
Pumpkaboo- she just thinks it's cute.
Hattrem- it's cute! If people come near her with negative emotions it beats them until they cry. She can't bring it out when Russia or Ukraina are around.
Tinkaton- little creature with a big hammer. Russia wanted her to have a Pokemon that could protect her. And girls like pink and big hammers, да?
Pichu- sort of like a nightlight. Can be used to shock Russia awake from a drunk stupor so he doesn't choke on his own vomit.

Nipponia: Espurr- cute cat with immense destructive power
Pyukumuku- cute! And the slime is good for skin.
Mimikyu- cute!

Ceruledge- cute! Can be used to practice swordwork.
Shedinja- cute! Can be used to steal souls.
Snom- cute! Can be used to cool off in summer.
Other contenders: Marshadow, Litten, Tinkaton, Tatsugiri
She only catches cute Pokemon. But her definition of cute is... unique.

UIP: Clodsire- He just has Clodsire vibes. Who doesn't want a friend-shaped... thing.
Smoliv- olives are important to Palestine. Plus, free olive oil.
Shuppet- it eats negative emotions, so it can help during his breakdowns. And get rid of the evil part of him (Israel)
Claydol- he's half-Jewish. And it's like one of those spinning things (don't tell him it's actually a dogu).
Tropius- Portable supply of fruit, and... I just like the idea of him having a Tropius and Kangwon having a Meganium. If you've seen the anime, you know why.
Sylveon- can be used to soothe his emotions when he has a breakdown. Basically an emotion support cat
Other contender: Drowzee

Canada: Bidoof- Canada loves him a beaver. Good for forestry. He wants it to evolve into a Bibarel, but it refuses. He'll never grow enough of a backbone to force it.
Hoothoot- a sentient clock for when he goes camping so he doesn't lose track of time.
Stantler- can be used to ride around on to hunt, plus the shed antlers can be used to make sleeping medicine. Good for his anxiety.
Staraptor- can be used to fly on to get across his huge country quickly.
Pachirisu- good for light for late night hikes, plus can be used to find berries for him
Riolu- great hiking partner, plus since it can snese emotions it can comfort him during panic attacks.

America: Guzzlord- unnatural creature that consumes everything in its path and is never satisfied. Living capitalism metaphor.
Regigigas- Huge, imposing, towed continents. Awful stats, though.
Garchomp- vicious, ruthless, sentient jet fighter.

Runerigus- can plague people with awful visions. Useful for 'negotiations.'
Buzzswole- overcompensating...
Naganadel- Portable poison-napalm machine.

ME (gods I wish I was a Pokemon master I wish my cat could breathe fire and light my enemies ablaze): Luxray, Toracat, Sprigatitio, Skitty, Glaceon, Solgaleo. If you know these or look them up, the pattern will be evident.

Maid Outfit!

[image] [image] [image]

As requested! You would never get him in a maid outfit, though, so storytelling has to be involved. The only reason Nipponia survived is because she didn't put his pins on the cutout.

I love typhoon weather. Wish it didn't kill people. Also I love seeing the response of the DPRK/China/Vietnam/even us to awful weather- quick evacuations, communal shelters, free hotels, quick repairs, free supplies and volunteer squads- versus America- armed police protecting grocery stores from people who have been made homeless or lost their money. Then those same people still go 'America number one! Waaaa!' I would say some god is punishing them, but actually I think it's just the American government.

Burgers And Zombies

[image] [image]

[image]

[image]

World's most gullible country versus the People's Gaslighter. She sold him a plot of land on Dokdo and he didn't even question it until he got there and remembered that they don't use money anymore. And Nipponia showed up to remind him that they're called Takeshima and they belong to her, arigato gozai*masu*.

Also joking aside, I remember the US occupation force in Japan designated the rocks as a bombing site and bombed Korean civilians there. And they are still far too involved in the matter for a country that *is across the sea in the other direction. My* opinion is that I like that the islands cause friction between Japan and the South, and they should continue to do so until the US stops trying to use us in a trifecta against the North. At which point they can be given over to the *rightful* government of Korea. Or we could share. They are just rocks.

Anyways, I think if I could speak fluent Korean and you gave me ten minutes alone in a room with Comrade Kim Jong-il I could convince him to produce a zombie movie. I hate how the government is always incompetent in zombie films. It is realistic that they wouldn't give a damn about people and prioritize those with status and making money over the common folk, but that's why I want a Socialist zombie film. The government is doing all it can, but the zombies are still a threat. They could totally make it a metaphor for capitalism/imperialism/American influence. The virus started in America as a bioweapon, drawing on real historical events, and the Imperial Core is prioritizing themselves over the countries they're exploiting. There could be rumours that the

Americans have developed a cure (because they made the virus), but won't give out the secret and are charging exorbitantly for it, so only the wealthiest with good connections can afford it. The DPRK could be one of the few places without major outbreaks because of how the UN doesn't let them travel. And the rising action of the movie could be trying to stop American or South Korean agents from infiltrating the country and infecting them, too, with the reactionaries being more focused on making sure the North is infected as well instead of curing the disease and taking care of their own civilians (inspired by that one dream I had). It might be better for the film to be localized instead of countrywide, and take place almost entirely in a village by the DMZ. That way you could have Southern defectors coming over with stories about the army mowing down civilians and rich people and politicians hiding in bunkers, while people fought in the streets. Meanwhile in the North they could have a Party member who came down from Pyongyang to inform them of what's going on and also to work with soldiers at the DMZ to try and find a cure. So you have the contrast of 'government turning a blind eye' versus 'government on the scene.' And the Southern civilians fighting amongst themselves could be used as a metaphor for American cultural values of selfishness and individualism infecting them (much like the zombie virus), while the traditional Korean and also Socialist value of collectivism would have the North Korean soldiers standing firm at the border, not abandoning their posts, making sure not a single zombie or saboteur makes it across, and the villagers helping each other and the Southern refugees out. The climax could be something like an enemy agent smuggling zombies across the border, and the villagers have to rally together with the defectors, the Party member, and the soldiers to wipe them out. But in the course, one of the heroes gets bit. He refuses to succumb to the virus and become a mindless, bloodthirsty slave, so he prepares to cross the DMZ to find the enemy agent and take them out. Everyone is beside themselves, refusing to let him go, and the Party member says something like 'Every life is precious to the Worker's Party, I can't let you do this.' And then he gets to deliver a speech about how Comrade Kim Il-sung and the soldiers of the KPRA gave their lives valiantly while fighting the Japanese, and how he can't do any less for his country. Every life is precious, so if he can give his for the sake of everyone there (and Comrade Kim Jong-il) he will. And everyone comes

around, except his wife or love interest. But the Party member gets it now, so she holds her back. And while he goes off, she can give another speech, this time about how their love for the General inspires them to fight. So the hero could cross the border, making it past the zombies because he's starting to turn. And he could reach the agent and kill them. But! It turns out the agent had a vial of the cure. And he knows he needs to get it back to the Party member. But as he limps through the horde, the zombies start to attack him, because even though he's infected physically, his heart remains pure with his devotion to his Fatherland. Clever camera angles could be used to avoid showing too much violence or gore as he struggles his way back to the border. Then the Party member sprints across and grabs him and the cure. He tries to get her to take just it, but she refuses and drags him back to safety, where he passes out. He has seemingly given his life for his people. But it worked. They have the cure. There could be a timeskip. Several months in the future and the DPRK has reverse-engineered the cure and is giving it out for free. My ideal ending is a mention that the South is ravaged but recovering with aid from the North, and that there is a mention of the American government getting killed by zombies through some karmic retribution while the American people are receiving cures from the DPRK, but I feel like if they put something like that in a movie, the South and America would use it as a chance to be like 'They want to invade!' So it would have to be carefully implied. Then it could end either with the Party member and the hero's wife visiting a statue to commemorate him and giving a speech about his bravery *or* because Comrade Kim Jong-il did not like when the hero of the story didn't get to see their happy ending, and I also don't like that, you could have a fake-out where you think he's dead, and they're laying flowers at a plaque to commemorate the victims, but then he walks up behind them, and it turns out that they got the cure in time to save his life. And then they could say he was brave and he could be like 'I was only following the General's example,' and boom, end credits. Honestly if you played it right, you wouldn't even have to show a single zombie until the end. It could lean the typical way that zombie films do, where in the end the humans are the real threat. But instead of a nihilistic message like that, it would be that capitalism/imperialism are the real dangers, with those who succumbed to them meeting bitter fates, while those who embraced Socialism and self-reliance came out on top. Unfortunately I cannot

speak fluent Korean and I never got to meet Comrade Kim Jong-il. And I don't think I could talk Comrade Kim Jong-un into it. So the world's best propaganda-zombie film will never be made. Sad!

Consensual International Alliances

This is the dumbest thing I've ever drawn (many contenders), but my cousin sent me the below image so I had to.

Spot the difference game. Ahem. Non-canon, obviously.

China's Worst Day

[image]

The worst day (two months) of China's life. He wasn't assaulted, he's naked for other purposes. I won't be providing the full context yet, but since this is referencing a real event, no silly story today. Only a mention that Americans, Israelis, Japanese nationalists and other anti-China types always seem far too enthused about the prospect of bombing the Three Gorges Dam, which would literally kill millions of people. Someone was like 'mostly soldiers!' and it's like okay! Soldiers are people, too! I know you don't see foreigners as people and consider them disposable pawns, but they are definitely people! And they would be defending their own country in that case, not invading someone else's! But also the number of cities I've seen said would be destroyed is sixty-six (I don't know if that's accurate, but it would definitely destroy plenty), and I don't think there is a single city in China that you could demolish where mostly soldiers would be murdered. There is no major Chinese city with a population under one million. Not to mention all the towns and villages and farmland, and the fact that Shanghai is downstream of it. Which is why I don't think you would be making it to the Three Gorges Dam to bomb it in the first place. It's also incredibly 'Eh?' when a Nationalist says Japan could do it, or an American says Japan or Taiwan could do it. For an American it's more understandable because they view the countries they own as pawns and the people in them as disposable, but for Nationalist types in Japan and Taiwan, you do realize that if we did that (besides it being an act of mass murder), we would not be surviving the aftermath? No thank you! I have no desire to be wiped off the face of the map in retaliation! And this is not the sort of situation where a suicide attack would be admirable. Though I do think China would probably stick to striking more strategic targets instead of wholesale destruction, like Lebanon and Iran did to Israel, we are still a small archipelago (and so is Taiwan). Not much to strike. It's always 'hate the government not the people,' (the government that the people brought about and the majority support) but then freaks start fantasizing about wiping out Chinese, North Korean, or Russian

civilians 'for the greater good,' and can't disguise the fact that they're drooling. *I* don't even fantasize about wiping out Americans, so I think you can keep it in your pants over the prospect of killing people that haven't done anything to you.

Sexualize That Father!

[image] [image]

[image]

[image]
[image] [image] [image]
[image] [image]
[image]

Some of you freaks (affectionate) have been waiting for this.

Alternative:

turning off notifications

Vampires

[image]

As requested, North as Lady Dmitrescu, and the female provinces as his daughters. SH is oldest, Hae is youngest, and South Pyongan is violentest.

It will be another day or two for a new chapter because I'm sick and I don't like writing when my head is gross.

Also I was with friends last weekend and was explaining this dream I had where I was riding on a bike with Comrade Kim Jong-un, and this girl who I was only seeing for the second time turned to me and said 'You seem to have an obsession with him.' I froze like she pointed a gun at me because this was literally only the second time I was seeing her. I had not spoken about Kim Jong-un or the DPRK all day so I was thinking 'WHAT did I say I her last time for her to have this impression?' I panicked and just said 'Eh? What?' And this is how I learned that my friend has been showing all the Kim Jong-un edits that I send her to this girl. I thought it would be funnier to not tell her I'm a Communist and just said that I think he's cute, and offered to show her another edit. She said yes.

October Revolution

[image] [image]

Happy October Revolution, comrades! CCCP lore to celebrate!
He was first formed by the four countries above, who once were the subjects of the Russian Empire until they joined the Bolsheviks, and established their Republics. Every time a country joined the Soviet Union, he absorbed them instead of dissolving them, so he is technically a mix of many people. Once they became the CCCP, their replacements were Russia, Ukraina, Belarus, and Transcaucasia (who later split into Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia). Byelorus' headscarf was knitted for her by a village woman, and it's the scarf Belarus wears in the present day. The original Russia's coat was a gift from Lenin, and it's the one CCCP also wears in the present day. He has been many things- 'noble,' revolutionary, soldier, politician, father. But most importantly, he is a single housewife.

Why am I awake so early? Is it:
a) I don't dislike waking up early and I'm a true morning person
b) I was so excited for the October Revolution that I woke up for it
c) I'm in Albania right now
d) I'm five days into the week I took of work to play Dragon Age Veilguard and I have slept for less than ten hours in total and now am finally taking a break to eat something other than dried fruit and chazuke

Unrelated, Veilguard is so good. My ancient bald boyfriend is responsible for around 85% of everything bad that has ever happened.

Close Enough (One-shot)

2019

China swept down the stairs of North's high-rise, idly wondering where he should go looking for willing women at such a late hour.

A bar or club was always a sure bet, but he didn't much feel like being surrounded by noise right now. They would close soon, anyhow, not leaving him time to get tipsy. And North's soldiers were always so serious when they were on duty. Towards him, at least, despite his long history of friendship with their people. Sometimes he thought his friend might have pointed him out as a special threat.

Perhaps he would just wander around until he found some other lonely soul up late, trying not to think about their life. It had worked before.

As he set foot on the final flight of stairs, he paused.

'Oh?'

A dim glow could be seen from the lobby, not the bright overhead lights, but a muted one, most likely from the kitchen. North hated to waste electricity- the moment the last person went upstairs (which had been China tonight, hoping that his friend might come down to have a drink with him), all lights should be extinguished.

The slight clink of porcelain that met China's keen hearing meant that someone was still up, and that he wouldn't have the pleasure of listening to North cuss out one of his provinces in the morning.

He finished his descent, footsteps inaudible on the stone floor. The glossy, marbled surface looked like true marble to the untrained eye, but China knew it was only regular stone. His friend disdained flashy materials, but was willing to pretend at them for

the aesthetic tastes of his provinces.

China quietly opened the kitchen door, making not a sound as he peered in.

He had half-expected the sight, but was still pleased to see North's back as he bent over the sink, swirling dishes through water that was hot enough to steam, rubbing them down with cheerful pink cloth before setting them on a drying rack.

China looked around at the spacious, well-furnished kitchen. His friend wasn't undeveloped- he could own a dishwasher if he wished. But much like the traditional agungi that was installed on one wall to heat the flat hearth for cooking, North preferred more old-style furnishings. He was certain the only reason he had a microwave or electric stove at all was for the convenience of the cooks.

China preferred more traditional means as well, but hadn't allowed himself to indulge in that for his own dwelling. It would be a flaw in his role, after all.

He stood in the doorway, silently watching North in the soft, dim light, waiting to see if he would notice him. As observant as his friend was, he rarely did.

He had changed out of the pristine black workshirt and pants he had been wearing earlier and into identical trousers and a white button-up, slightly less formal, if only because of the stray thread China could see extending from one rolled-up sleeve. His nightclothes, though they were indistinguishable from office worker's attire.

China slept in a red silk nightgown, usually, when he wore clothes to sleep at all. Sometimes he didn't, because silk took forever to warm up, especially when your sheets were also made of it. But changing into warm pants and a shirt wouldn't match the part he needed to play.

He wondered if his friend had come down to drink with him after all, or if he was just running from sleep as usual. He felt a pang of dissatisfaction that he might have only had to wait another hour for

him to show up.

He supposed he could bother him before he left. Just a slight indulgence.

North set another bowl onto the drying rack, *'tch'*ing in irritation as a droplet of water rolled down his blue forearm to dampen his shirt sleeve.

'Might as well.'

China stepped farther into the room, prowling silently towards him. His careful footsteps made not a noise, but there was still a risk that North's innate paranoia would turn him around before the Chinese country reached his target.

He didn't, and he managed to get within a foot of his friend, able to peer down the back of his collar at one of the little light blue scars that peppered his entire body. Or what China had seen of it, anyway.

It was the one scar he had never been able to identify the cause of. Knives, bullet wounds, burns, small innocuous cuts from using machinery or from particularly fierce papers. The souvenir that crossed his muscled chest and had to have been left by a tachi. His friend had suffered hundreds of wounds of different calibres, and that was just those that had left marks.

This scar was too small to have been anything too serious, and too thin and curved to have been a graze from a bullet or blade. So far China's best guess was a branch, most likely earned from a guerrilla's hurried flight through the underbrush. Though the location was strange for a twig to have caught him.

Someone normal might have simply asked. But that would ruin the fun of it.

North scrubbed at a particularly stubborn red stain on a plastic dish, from kimchi juice. While China wasn't exactly the esper he pretended to be, he could practically hear the other man thinking, *'A **clay** pot wouldn't stain like this.'*

He smiled, running through his usual options for startling him, among which was blowing a sharp breath at that little unidentified (as of yet) scar.

The Korean man huffed, dropping the dish with a splash, stopping in his efforts for a moment to stare deeply into the soapy water, his shoulders dropping slightly.

Ah, he was as tired as China had suspected earlier, at the Victory Day parade. This would require kindling more righteous anger than usual, then.

He slowly pulled his hands from his sleeves, then stepped forward, leaning over North's back, wrapping his arms around his thin waist, and resting his chin on his shoulder in smooth, seamless form, capturing him in only a few seconds.

Usually his friend's reaction would be immediate anger, knowing exactly who it was because honestly, who else would be stupid enough to try this? There would be a moment as brief as the flicker of a mayfly's wings where he leaned into the touch, but it was subconscious, and would be swiftly replaced by him lashing out, and China would be forced to avoid an elbow to the ribs, head to the skull, or leg to the anywhere-North-could-reach. Then he would be subjected to an angry tirade, during which the word 'freak' would be used at least once, and degenerate would *definitely* be used once China informed him where he intended to go and what- or who- he intended to do.

But not tonight.

China wasn't surprised very often, and he had a sort of love-hate relationship with the very concept. He hated being caught off guard, and couldn't afford to be. But the sheer novelty of it could sometimes be amusing.

But as North not only didn't pull away from him, but actually moved closer, pressing his back into China's chest, and leaning his head against his shoulder, letting out a small, tired sigh as he did, China was surprised. Baffled, even. Enough so that his mask slipped for the briefest of moments.

His slender eyes slid open in shock, before he swiftly narrowed them again, only just stopping himself from tensing.

His friend had his own eye shut, his short lashes barely grazing his striped cheek, which was brushing China's. He could feel his sharp ribs under the arms crossed over his waist, and how warm he was.

North didn't move, so he didn't, either, holding perfectly still, not even breathing, like his friend was some rare, endangered creature that would bolt if he made the slightest movement. Which he knew was true, and would probably get him injured in the process.

They couldn't have stayed that way for very long. Despite North's own mask slipping partway off, he was still wearing it. And there was no chance that he would let himself be held for a minute, or even half of one.

Still, the moment stretched out, soft and warm like a cat in summer sunshine, and China wished it could last forever.

Then North stepped away, easily breaking the circle of his arms to lean over the sink again, not looking at him as he picked the stubborn plastic dish back up.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked gruffly, and China let his lungs fill with oxygen again as he came around to stand at his seeing side, a safe distance away.

"You know you have workers for this sort of thing," he said, not answering. "And I have it on good word that your pretty little kitchen women are employed here full-time. They'll be sad if you steal all their work."

Most of North's 'pretty little kitchen women' were actually women in their later years, who either couldn't work proper jobs due to physical disabilities, but didn't want to sit around, or were technically supposed to be retired, but couldn't bear to relax at a senior's resort. Most of them had also rapped China on the knuckles with a spoon at least once for flirting with them.

"They still get paid the same," North grunted, refusing to turn his way as he scrubbed vigorously at the stained plastic.

China knew that that little moment of warmth had probably earned him a frigid attitude for the next little while. His friend would feel the need to overcompensate for the brief vulnerability.

As they said 'Moment's bliss; lifetime suffering.' *He* said that, anyway.

Sighing, he picked up one of the wet dishes, along with a nearby dry blue cloth, starting to wipe it down. "Would you even have kitchen staff if your provinces hadn't pestered you into hiring them?"

"No," North muttered. "What are you doing?"

"Helping." China smiled at him as he set the dried plate aside. "I know you hate when people do that, but maybe if I dry and put away, you might actually get some sleep tonight."

"I'm not tired," North denied, though China knew there was no way he would have done what he had if he wasn't.

"Then I'll just help out for old time's sake." Back before his friend had staff, and would make China help clean the kitchen after a holiday.

Though China knew today couldn't end with them sleeping together on the wooden floor with bottles of soju on the table, he still wanted to recapture that moment of peace he had felt.

'Foolish,' he thought, as North turned back to his washing without another word, a silent allowance.

He knew better than anyone that the past couldn't be relived. It was gone and never could be again. The only things that could follow were similar, never the same. Pale and plastic instead of fine old clay.

China sighed, plucking the dish from North's hands and turning it over, swiping the kimchi juice that his friend's mouthy blue

province had spilled on the table from the side it was *actually* on. The Korean snatched it back, glaring at both him and it, before running his cloth over the surface again, squinting critically.

The Chinese man smiled at him as the dish was grudgingly handed back, and he was allowed to dry it.

Then again, his friend had always had a penchant for making him act like a fool.

—

North prickled with embarrassment as he awkwardly washed the dishes, trying to ignore China at his side.

Ssi-bal, he couldn't believe he had done that. He knew China wouldn't bring it up, but it rankled that there was something to bring up at all.

He was just exhausted, still stressed over the failed summit in Hanoi, which he just *knew* America was still laughing over. The miguk-nom had had no intentions of discussing normalization of relations in any real capacity, and he had fucking *known* that. Of course his repeated offer to denuclearize so long as America did, too, had been denied, and of course the American puppet president had demanded complete denuclearization from *him* before even slightly loosening the sanctions- because it was the one thing they knew he would never do, especially not after what had happened to Libya.

So now *he* was the unreasonable one, walking away from the table again, while the Yankee warhawks spread lies against his country. It was the same method they had used during the peace talks in the Fatherland Liberation War. And while he wished he could be cautiously optimistic about the summit at the DMZ last month, no real progress had been made since then, and he privately doubted that it would be.

But every *damn* time the possibility of lifting sanctions or even relaxing them came up, North had no choice but to leap for it like a cat with a string, debasing his pride because it was what his people

needed.

So he was tired and stressed, and there hadn't been a good enough excuse for him to allow any of his provinces to foist contact on him lately. Celebrating with his people earlier had just made it worse. He had gotten to lose himself in the crowd, to have his arm clasped and shoulders held and clung to, the Koreans of the North enjoying that they were some of the few people in the world that actually got to celebrate alongside their country instead of at their feet.

But none of the embraces had been long enough, and now he was restless and carried an unscratchable itch under his blue skin. An *ache.*

Not that he *wanted* to be touched or even liked it. But it was his excuse for why when China's warm arms had encircled him, his first instinct hadn't been to attempt to maim him, as it usually was. That and how distracted he was thinking about how in a few years both Moon and Trump would be out of their respective offices, and he would lose a rare opportunity brought about by their combination of sense and desire for a spectacle. And that stupid kimchi 'stain.'

He was going to have to avoid him until he left tomorrow. And then refuse to answer his weekly phone calls until Liberation Day.

They silently did the dishes, the feeling familiar to the 80s and before, but different. Too different for North's prickly feeling to go away.

"Do you ever wonder what life would be like if we were normal?" China asked abruptly. "Humans, I mean."

"No," North said immediately, carefully washing Hae's pink rice bowl.

"I've always admired that every single drop of your imagination goes towards improvements for your country and exactly nothing else," China hummed.

North gave him a withering side-eye.

"It's interesting to think about, though, isn't it?" his comrade hummed, drying Hae's bowl just as carefully as North had washed it. "What our lives would be in another world."

"We would both be dead," North said bluntly. "I doubt I would have lived this long if I were human."

"You have a fairly long life expectancy here," China said. "A hundred and nine wouldn't be so strange."

North gave him another side-eye. "And how old would *you* be?"

His comrade smiled. "However old you wanted."

The Korean *'tch'*ed, his question going unanswered for another year.

"I would be dead, anyways," he said, thinking of all the times he had gone a month without food or water, locked away by Japan. All of the beatings, broken bones, ruptured organs, and that damned tachi wound.

A human couldn't have survived that. He barely had as it was.

But he had had to.

"I suppose it could be likely," China conceded, stacking the dry dishes to take to the cupboard. "We both could have given our lives fighting for our freedom, or in that war of ours."

"Mine," North corrected.

"And yet me and mine are here celebrating with you." China smiled winningly. If he could ever be said to. "But if we *hadn't* been martyred, what do you think your life would look like?

North gazed at the plate in his hands, his reflection wavery and distorted in its slick white surface.

The thought had crossed his mind before, only once. Standing across from Kim Il-sung, years ago, during the war. The barest flicker of wondering who Song-ju and North could have been,

instead of the General and Korea.

It was useless to wonder, but once China had something in his head, he was implacable until he got an answer. Which was incredibly annoying, since *he* never returned the favour.

North tried to imagine it, being just a regular guerrilla during the war against Japan, taking up a regular job before fighting in the Fatherland Liberation War, being an honoured veteran after. Or being alive now, never having fought in any war, instead being another ember in the fire, prepared for the possibility.

He thought he still would have ended up in a People's Committee, and in the Worker's Party. He would still see flaws, things that could be better, and be driven to change them. He couldn't bear to feel like he wasn't doing all he could for his country.

Or maybe he wouldn't. As difficult as it was to imagine, if he hadn't been born a Countryhuman, maybe he wouldn't have felt that same sense of burning responsibility, that he needed to do more, protect everyone. Maybe it would have been enough to be a factory worker producing steel or commodities for the sake of his country, returning home after to try and cook his own meal. Maybe in a normal life, he actually could.

No, if he were a normal man, he would have to have a wife. The only reason it wasn't strange that he didn't now, after being alive for so long, was because he was a Countryhuman, who didn't have time for relationships and could never see one of his beloved people that way.

He tried to envision coming home to a meal cooked by a woman who worked at the same factory as him, doing the dishes for her once they were done eating, quietly talking after they had put their few children to bed, content that all he needed to do for his country was help out his neighbours, raise patriotic children, and live a happy live.

Unable to do anything about the sanctions or the provocations or the looming threat of America.

Who would he be if it weren't for the Occupation? If it weren't for Japan's cruelty, his and his brother's split, his experiences in the People's Anti-Japanese War and Fatherland Liberation War, and the Arduous Marches? If he had never known his provinces or his General?

If he weren't Korea.

Would he be the sort of man that could be content with an existence like that? It was what he wanted for his people- a free, happy life with no worries. But for him...

"I wouldn't want it," he said to China, breaking from his contemplation to give the dish another once-over, washing away the imagined mundane life.

"No happy domestic life with a lovely little wife and ten children?" his comrade asked, taking the plate.

A life with mundane worries and mundane problems. Where he wouldn't be so exhausted and hungry and furious all the time, his shoulders aching under the weight of Korea. A life where he wouldn't be able to stand in the center of a crowd and see the bright eyes and happy smiles of his people as they revelled, or to protect those smiles.

"If I were content in a life like that, I wouldn't be me," North said simply. "So there's no point in imagining it."

"Mm, I suppose that's fair." China contemplated the dish himself for a moment. "I suppose I wouldn't want a normal life, either. However would I afford so many phones to resell?"

"It's for the best," North said, resuming his washing. "I would feel sorry for any woman you imposed yourself on as a husband."

China laughed, drying their 'mirror' and setting it aside. "I would, too. But I guess that's another reason I wouldn't want a normal life."

He turned to him, smiling, his eyes cracked slightly. "I wouldn't have met my best friend."

North turned aside to move the last few dishes into the sink, hiding how warm his cheeks were. "I changed my mind. I want to be a regular human."

"I still would have found you, somehow," China assured (threatened) him. "We would have fought in our Fatherland Liberation War together, and we could have died at each other's sides. Then neither of us would have to worry about imposing ourselves on women, or mundanity."

"I should have shot you back then," North muttered.

China laughed again, flicking him with his cloth. "It's far too late now. You're stuck with me." He considered for a moment. "Though I suppose you *could* try again, if you really wanted to. We are alone, and surrounded by knives. Most Countryhumans never get such a good chance."

"Too much of a hassle." North handed one of those knives to him, handle-first. "I have enough to deal with right now."

China nodded in approval. "Pragmatic. World peace first, then you can try and stab me."

North nodded solemnly. "Exactly."

They finished up the dishes in comfortable silence, though North was trying his best to keep his hackles up from earlier.

When he was done, he plunged his hands into the water one last time, finding the plug and pulling it, the water draining with a quiet gurgle. He placed it on the drying pad.

"Aiya."

He tensed as China gently caught one of his wrists, pulling him forward to squint at his hand. North quickly tugged it free, glaring at him.

"I *hate* it when you grab me like that."

"How hot was that water?" the other man asked, ignoring him and

flicking his now-wet fingers. "You're going to give yourself cracked hands like that."

North glowered, then reconsidered.

He turned fully towards China, stepping closer to him with a serious look. The other man tipped his head curiously.

North reached out with intent and grabbed the skirt of his cheongsam, using it to dry his hands, maintaining eye contact as he did.

China's smile didn't waver. "My one good article of clothing."

North snorted, releasing him and putting distance between them again, leaving dark splotches on the scarlet fabric. "Don't act like you haven't left half your wardrobe here."

To add insult to injury, he made a show of using a regular towel to dry his hands as well, since silk didn't do a good enough job.

"Amongst other things." China picked up a mug from the drying rack, turning it in his hands, admiring the picture of Mao Zedong adorning the ceramic.

"You can throw that one out," North said, taking the last few dry cups to the cupboard.

"You already went to the trouble of washing it," China hummed, following. He knew not to trap North between him and the counter, leaning around him instead to set it next to the other glasses and cups, turning it so his Chairman was smiling out at North's kitchen.

The Korean turned it around again, pushing it to the back of the cupboard. Tomorrow, he would attempt to put it in China's luggage and get rid of it once and for all. And after China departed, he would find it in his kitchen again, no matter how close of an eye he tried to keep on him.

And it wouldn't be very close, because he was going to be avoiding him.

North surveyed the kitchen one last time, satisfied that it was in good condition for when his staff arrived tomorrow, and that Kim Pil-ae wouldn't have a reason to threaten him with a spoon. A good one, anyways.

He flicked off the overhead light, leaving them in darkness.

"Need a flashlight?" China asked from far too close. Closer than he had been a second ago.

"No. And I hate when you do that." North expertly navigated the kitchen, out into the lobby.

China followed, letting him hear his footsteps. Unfortunately, it didn't sound like he bashed his shins off of anything.

To prove a point, North headed for the stairs in total dark.

"Walk me up to my room?" China asked, still from right behind him. "I might get lost if you don't."

"Not heading out to inflict yourself on my people tonight?" North asked scathingly.

"No, I'm not in the mood." China's voice came from in front of him now, and the finger that prodded his side made him jolt.

"Turn on your light," North ordered and the flashlight of a Huawei phone lit up the stairway, before being dimmed as it was dropped back into where it had come from.

"After you." China smiled, gesturing a long, glowing sleeve at the stairs.

North stared at him until he sighed, starting up.

"So paranoid."

North stayed a few paces behind him to counter the other man's attempts to brake-check him. But if he got too far behind, China would stop, staring back at him, waiting patiently.

After the third stand-off lasted for two minutes, North sighed, resigning himself to his fate and trudging up the stairs.

China let him follow him for a few paces before halting abruptly, almost making him stumble, like he had known he was going to do.

His comrade smiled slyly over his shoulder at him, definitely going to do it again.

North huffed, then suddenly grabbed China, shoving him facefirst into the side of the stairwell and twisting his arms behind his back like he was handcuffing him. The man's resistance was lacklustre, and once he was secured by his wrists at North's side, the Korean walked him forward like he was marching him to trial.

"Is it too much to ask you to walk properly?" he grumbled, hoping that none of his provinces would come down for a late-night drink.

"Clearly," China hummed, smiling sideways at him.

North huffed again, facing forward so his comrade couldn't see his facial expression change as he marched him off to bed.

North could never be anything else other than Korea, and China could never be anything but China. That would always hang between them, colouring their relationship. They could never be normal men with a normal friendship. Neither of them would want to be, when it would mean giving up their people.

But times like these, tired and warm, with the water from North's dishwater-pruned hands spotting China's clothes as his friend tried to trip him up on the staircase, fighting his sentencing, it felt like they came pretty close.

If you want me to stop making pointless, slightly melancholic chapters about their friendship, you'll have to kill me. And I don't think any of you are up to the task. There will be more.

Also China dropped tariffs to zero for a bunch of poor nations, so they can more easily export their goods to China, which is good for their economies. Multi-polar world, baby! What's that saying? 'When America visits, we get bombed; when China

visits, we get hospitals.' Something like that.

Motivations (One-shot)

'Ssi-bal, I'm going to regret this, aren't I?'

North Korea shut the door to the bedroom where the foreign woman had been herded, already cursing himself for giving in to her tears.

"Keep watch on her," he ordered the young woman in a soldier's uniform that stood next to him in the hall. "Her personal affects are being searched right now. Someone will bring them by later. Don't worry about checking her person for trackers. Comrade South Hamgyong will do it when she wakes up."

"Understood, Comrade General." Seo Chung-cha saluted. "If she's to be staying here, will she require a full-time guard?"

Her black eyes glinted, and he huffed.

"Comrade Seo Chung-gun might prefer his daughter does another rotation at the DMZ."

"Abeoji watches over our roads, and I watch over our country's domicile," she said airily. "We both have important parts to play."

North hid his huff of amusement. The truth was that while watching the high-rise that was his personal headquarters in Pyongyang was a boring job, it was one of prestige as well, reserved solely for those North knew he and his provinces could trust wholeheartedly. As the daughter of a prominent military family that stretched back to the Japanese Occupation-

'Big Brother says I was brave. And he said that one day when I'm older, I can fight the Japanese!'

-Seo Chung-cha was one of those. It helped that she was a Party member in good standing, even at her young age.

"She *will* need a full-time guard," he admitted. "The position is

yours. We'll need another." He looked to the man standing at their side, also clad in a soldier's uniform. "As a woman, she should have other women watching her. Comrade Ran Do-hyun, you're dismissed."

Ran Do-hyun saluted. "Yes, Comrade General. I'll return to keeping your front door safe."

"And smoking with Rang Chung-hee," North said, keeping his tone that of a commander's.

"No, Comrade General, never Comrade General."

North could feel the grin the older man sent over his shoulder to Seo Chung-cha, who arched her brows professionally as he strode off.

"Any requests for a partner?" North asked Seo Chung-cha when they were alone.

"Comrade Soo Chun-hui," the woman said immediately.

The Countryhuman nodded thoughtfully. "Would she be willing to return to service?"

The two women had served their mandatory years at the DMZ together, before Soo Chun-hui had left to work on a cooperative farm in her native South Hwanghae province. As North recalled, it was her desire to become a manager there and 'produce enough apples that everyone vomits red.' Which was pleasing for the country, but less pleasing for the Countryhuman to hear.

Seo Chung-cha narrowed her sharp eyes thoughtfully. "How long will this assignment last?"

North paused. How long *would* it last? He had just made the decision to let an illegal American immigrant stay in his country and work as a newscaster. It wouldn't be temporary- she would *live* here now.

'If she isn't a spy.'

Obviously if it turned out she wasn't an enemy agent and she went on to have a normal life here, he couldn't keep guards on her at all times. Monitored, yes, but any soldier could do that.

He decided not to tell her that. If she was an enemy spy, he didn't want her to know there was freedom from surveillance in her future.

"Until her intentions are proven," he decided.

"Then I am sure this assignment would be interesting enough to bring Comrade Soo Chun-hui back, General," Seo Chung-cha replied.

"I will contact her, then." North walked the woman back to the door. "Until then, keep your firearm close. She looks weak, but we don't know if the Yankees sent any new poisons or technologies for her to test."

She *felt* weak, too. When he had caught her after she swooned, she had been light as a feather in his arms. Insubstantial.

His skin crawled at the memory. He hated touching people, especially strangers. Especially *American* strangers.

"Yes, Comrade General." Seo Chung-cha saluted. "Also, Eomeoni wants to know if you and Comrade Kangwon will come by for dinner soon."

"Next Sunday," he assured her. He could clear an hour or two for him and his province, for an old friend's family. He could even try to force down a meal. Or part of one, at least.

He dipped his head to his soldier, striding down the hall. He only made it a few paces before one of the doors swung open. He grimaced as he reluctantly turned around, knowing who it was.

"Korea," South Hamgyong said, her arms crossed over her paint-splattered apron. "Emergency meeting as soon as everyone is home."

"Since when are *you* the head of this household?" he coolly asked her.

She raised a brow skeptically, tapping her foot slowly and pointedly on the ground.

"Fine," he growled, spinning away. "But don't bother me until then."

He had to speak to his comrades at the Broadcasting Station and explain their unusual new coworker. And the Supreme Leader, once he was done with his on-the-spot-guidance, to explain why he was doing something as stupid as this.

Maybe he could find a way to explain it to *himself* in the meantime.

North folded his hands on the table, his face remaining stoic as his Provincehumans gaped at him with expressions ranging from shocked to confused to outright angry.

"So let me get this fucking straight," North Hamgyong said eventually. "You're letting a damn *foreigner* stay in our house?"

"Not only a foreigner- nothing against those, obviously, international solidarity, blah blah- but a *Yankee?"* South Pyongan's eyebrow ascended above the pale blue flower on her face. "Have you finally snapped?"

"I haven't snapped and I'm never going to," North growled at her. "I made a consideration."

And the hours between making his decision and this conversation had given him time to think of a justification for it.

"North Hwanghae is the one that said last week that we are at a critical juncture when it comes to information and publicity," he said, nodding to the man.

"It's true," Hwang agreed, pushing his glasses up on his face. "We are fighting a losing front on the worldwide web, with our media being censored by foreign companies, and outlets and sites that are sympathetic to us being shut down more and more frequently. And

you're all aware the puppet government in the South is being truly obnoxious in their efforts to send more propaganda balloons our way, painting themselves and America as paradise in an effort to lure more defectors over there."

"Where they get locked up in Hanawon, threatened, paid to lie about us, yadda yadda yadda," South Pyongan cut in. "Get to the point where taking in some American chick helps with any of that."

"The average Westerner thinks of our people as a hivemind," Hwang reminded her. "'Brainwashed' is that word they love so much. If I were to guess, I would say Korea wants someone born and raised- I assume- in America to get in front of a camera and tell them that's not true."

North nodded, the province's assessment was correct, as they usually were. "And on top of that, she can tell our people firsthand about her life in America, and actively disperse the narrative about a 'land of opportunity' that our enemy likes to spin."

The only opportunity in America was to join the machine- to support the genocide, war, famine, and pestilence that the nation spread across the globe- or be crushed by it.

"What if she *has* no experiences to share?" South Hamgyong asked, her brow furrowed. "We don't know anything about her. If she had the money for a passport and plane tickets, she might be a capitalist trying to dodge taxes or escape punishment for some crime."

"Americans don't punish capitalists for crimes, remember?" South Pyongan semi-joked. "The taxes thing, though- maybe."

"That is where *you* come in," North told SH. "Find out who she is."

Though with how pathetic and desperate she had been, he had a feeling the American woman was one of those who would have been crushed.

His province nodded, accepting the task easily, as it was one he had assigned her many times throughout their long lives. Out of the

female provinces he still had-

'Make sure you come back now, Korea.'

'Don' make us wait too long, you hear?'

-she was the least threatening, physically. And the most sly.

She snapped off a salute, oval face serious. "Yes, Comrade General."

From the way the American woman had begged, he did not think she was a capitalist fleeing from her crimes. Not only would no member of the bourgeoisie choose the *Democratic People's Republic of Korea* over a place like Switzerland or some Caribbean island where they could continue to exploit the native population while not paying taxes, but there had been a lack of pride to her.

North had dealt with many landowners, capitalists, and bourgeois intellectuals in his lifetime. They all had an inherent disdain to them, an innate sense that they were better than the people around them that had been bred into their bones by generations of exploiting those 'lesser' people. They could learn to overcome it, to see those around them as equals, but that prideful slant could never quite be hidden. Even while some of them begged for their lives, it was still there, lingering in the set of the shoulders and the corners of the eyes.

The American woman carried none of that. She had cringed and grovelled with an ease that said begging was natural to her.

A spy, maybe. A capitalist? Doubtful.

"And if she's an enemy?" North Hamgyong asked. "What then?"

"We execute her," North said coldly. "North Pyongan, don't give me that look. An American agent on our soil is a fair target. They never hesitate to eliminate one of ours."

"They never hesitate to elimate our civs, either," South Pyongan pointed out. "Just saying, maybe don't let her near any preschools or hospitals."

He had no intentions of that in the first place.

"Fine," North Hamgyong growled. "Let's say she has a bunch of sob stories for us and is willing to tell them. And let's say she's somehow *not* a damn enemy agent. Why the *fuck* does she have to stay in *our house?"*

South Pyongan grinned. "Yeah, you don't even like having *us* in your house."

North tended not to sleep in the high-rise when his provinces weren't in the city, and he knew damn well one of his comrades at the Worker's Party Headquarters had accidentally snitched and told her that.

He curled his lip at her. "Maybe I *would* if you actually cleaned up after yourself and didn't blast *'Bellows'* at two in the morning."

"I'm blasting music at two in the morning because that's when I'm cleaning up after myself," she countered. "I'm busy doing important Party stuff during the day."

"Next time it happens, I'm sending you to Ryanggang."

"Then I can blast music in the fields," she said happily. "Ryanggang, hope you like *'March In Step, OneTwoThree'* because I've been *really* into it lately."

Ryanggang sighed deeply.

"Why is she sleeping on the same floor as me?" North Hangyong loudly demanded, pounding a fist on the table.

"Manners," SH sighed, flicking his large hand.

"Because I am not going to spend my day having to go out of my way to check in on wherever she is to make sure she isn't assassinating one of our people," North growled at him. "If she is here, at least one of us will usually be around to keep an eye on her."

A rapidly waving hand caught his atrention, and he sighed. "What

is it, South Hwanghae?"

The small woman immediately asked, "Can *ah* keep an eye on her, Korea?"

"No."

She pouted, slumping. "Aw."

North Hamgyong crossed his broad green arms over his chest. "You can't tell me that *you* of all fucking people want to have a stranger a floor down from where you sleep."

No. He did not. Sleep was probably going to be an even more arduous task for him than it usually was.

"Think of it this way, cuz," South Pyongan said, leaning back on her palms. "The closer she is, the less energy it takes to *khh!-"* She drew finger sharply across her throat. "-her if we find out she's a spy."

"When," North Hamgyong corrected acidicly.

"I have made my decision," North said, glaring at him. "She stays here until she is proven trustworthy. Then she moves to an apartment."

He already had one set up for her, on the other side of town. Whenever she discussed her living situation, she could refer to it, until she actually moved in.

North didn't want word of her living in his house to spread. It would be a source of confusion for his people, and a base for unpleasant rumours from foreign countries that liked to accuse him of any number of degenerate actions.

"I'm more interested in what she said to you for you to allow her to stay," North Pyongan said, leaning past his sister. "Even with these considerations, it's not like you to do this. Usually you would just send her back."

North grimaced, looking aside.

"Yeah, Comrade Paranoia letting some chick- some *Yan-kee* chick- just waltz in here and stay is pret-*ty* strange." South Pyongan tapped her chin. "What did she do to make you say yes? Is she a mega-rich capitalist after all? Is she going to pay people in the UN off to make them finally leave us alone?"

"Does she have any important information from the American government?" Hwang pondered. "Or even access codes for a company?"

"Oo, oo!" Hae bounced in place. "Does she know how to make that weird pink mystery meat in a can?"

"Maybe Korea just wants to be nice," SH said defensively. "She is a refugee, after all. Would *you* want to live in America?"

"Nope!"

"Certainly not."

"Fuck no."

"I would *literally* rather kill myself."

"There you go," SH said victoriously. "Then maybe that's why Korea is letting her stay. He's allowed to do nice things for the sake of them, every once and while."

She smiled encouragingly at him and he remained stony-faced.

A small knowingly smile twisted the corner of Kangwon's russet lips. "Did she cry and beg?" he asked, sipping his tea.

North's jaw clenched.

"You fucking bleeding heart!" North Hangyong spat, catching the motion. "You're going to get us all killed."

"I am *not* a bleeding heart," North forced though gritted teeth. "The moment we find out she is working for the enemy, I'll put a bullet in her skull myself."

"Aaand in the meantime, she gets to live here and eat our food." South Pyongan clicked her tongue, sounding unbothered. "You *really* need to get better at dealing with discomfort."

North couldn't help it. Tears made him uncomfortable at the best of times. Combined with pleading and sobbing, he couldn't take it. When the American woman with her bound wrists had gotten on her knees and started wailing like a funeral mourner, face ugly, red, and tear-streaked, his immediate priority had become stopping the display and getting himself away from her.

And if the way to do that was giving her a job and letting her live in his country until she was revealed as a spy, then that was what he had to do.

"I do not need to justify myself to you," he said stiffly. "She stays here until she is either executed or moves out. That is final."

SH sighed, shaking her head in exasperation, but still said, "Yes, Korea."

"Yes, Korea," the rest agreed, one-by-one. He thought they might call for a vote, but it seemed his justifications had succeeded at convincing them.

"Yes, Korea," North Hamgyong muttered, as recalcitrantly as possible to let him know he was not pleased.

North wasn't exactly, either.

"I should get the analysis on her back soon," he said, standing. "If her background clears, or our people can't find anything, then she gets to live here. North Hwanghae, make sure to factor her wages into the budget."

"We're paying her?" SH asked, raising her brows. "Usually foreigners do information work on their own."

"Giving her an income does add fuel to enemy propaganda," Hwang said. "They may not be able to label her as brainwashed, but they could say she was lying for money."

North knew that, but there was really no way around it.

"This will be her job," he told them. "She needs an income. We'll hold it until she's proven trustworthy, but do you really think I would make a worker do unpaid labour?"

"You should stop making me clean my room then."

"South Pyongan, I am going to stop you from *breathing* soon." He looked back to Hwang. "She's getting the same wages as a regular broadcaster. If the enemy wants to accuse her of moving to one of the most heavily-sanctioned countries in the world for a broadcaster's salary, then that's their problem.

"And I'm referring to her as a propaganda girl," he added after a moment's thought.

"That sounds unflattering for us," Hwang rightly said. "What's the angle?"

"I want her on edge," he told him. "If she feels like her position is dangerous or tenuous, she'll be more likely to slip up."

"So you *are* at least aware she's probably a spy?" North Hangyong asked.

"Yes," he growled. "You know damn well I know better than any of you that America will stop at no lengths to destroy us. This wouldn't be his most insidious method yet."

But it would be his strangest.

"In the meantime, don't tell her about her future wages or apartment. And I don't need to tell any of you not to share important information."

They all nodded seriously. As light-hearted and carefree as some of his provinces were, he knew that none of them were light-mouthed or careless when it came to their country's security.

"Chagang, once she wakes up, get a read on her," he ordered the as-of-yet-silent man. He was skilled at reading people, and had

caught quite a few traitors over the years.

The tall, blue Provincehuman dipped his head. "Yes, Korea."

"North Pyongan and Kangwon, you two are skilled at putting people at ease. Get her alone, get information about her. South Pyongan, North Hamgyong, neither of you are skilled at putting people at ease. Keep your distance."

"Gladly," the man muttered.

"No promises," the woman drawled. "You know I love teasing a Yank."

"Ryanggang, if she spends too much time with you, she'll think we torture farmers here. Try not to make her think that."

"Ayuh, Korea," the green-skinned man sighed, the bags under his eyes heavy as he swigged the last of his tea like an old man trapped in a twenty-something's body.

Seriously, he worked the same eight hours that everyone did. North had no idea why he had the disposition of a coal miner back during the Occupation.

"South Hamgyong, you are the most important player here," he told her, and a glance passed between them. "I want you to be the one accompanying her most of the time."

She hesitated. "Korea, the forest fires in my province-"

"You will have leave to visit if things get worse," he promised. "Your people need to see their Provincehuman on the ground."

"I feel like we do *not* contribute enough to global warming for us to suffer so much from it," South Pyongan complained. North silently agreed.

SH nodded, relieved. "Yes, Korea. If she's a threat, I'll find out for you."

"Good."

"What about me, Korea?" Hae jumped up, her big eyes wide. "Do ah get to do anything important? Ah've never got to talk to a Yankee that wasn't tryin' to kill us before!"

"What about those defectors after the war?" Kangwon asked.

Hae considered that for a moment before saying, "Ah've never got to talk to a Yankee *woman* that wasn't tryin' to kill us before."

"The Black Panthers?" Hwang reminded her. "They had women in their party."

Hae pouted, crossing her arms. "Ah just want to talk to her an' ask her stuff," she admitted.

North hesitated. He didn't want Hae going anywhere near a possible threat. She wasn't as naïve as she acted, but she did see the best in people. He didn't want some miguk-nom spy taking advantage of that to-

He stopped himself from baring his teeth with an effort. "You can speak with her. But make sure you have a weapon on you at all times. And don't forget that she could be the enemy."

"Ah won't, Korea!" Hae chirped, victorious once more.

North gritted his teeth, though it was for the best. South Hwanghae could be... overwhelming, but with her wide-eyed innocent charm, she was also useful at finding out what they needed to know.

"Alright," he said seriously, scanning them all. "You have your assignments. Carry on as usual until she wakes up."

His provinces saluted, then walked out of the room, off to do paperwork or work on personal projects or blast *'March In Step OneTwoThree*' until he burst in and ordered her to stop.

When they were gone, he huffed, the rigidity going out of his shoulders as he checked his work phone. He lifted his lip at the device, seeing again that China had texted him on it, when he had specifically told him not to and he shouldn't even have this number.

Aside from that, the last message was from his Supreme Leader, asking if their 'guest' was settling in well, that he had already replied to. No word on her identification yet.

North put the phone away, off to his office to work on his own reports. On that subject, he would have to inform his provinces about the strict 'no bringing state secrets home' policy once again. They all already knew, but it couldn't hurt to remind some of them (South Pyongan). Their security would need to be doubled while the foreign woman was staying here.

As he passed the fifth floor, he nodded to Seo Chung-cha, who called, "She hasn't woken yet, Comrade Korea."

"If you need someone to cover nightshift before Comrade Soo Chun-hui arrives, wake Comrade South Hamgyong up," he told her.

She saluted in affirmation.

North settled into his sturdy office chair on the top floor, looking over his papers. Reports on the minor fires in southern South Hamgyong province, brought on by the unusually hot summer. Light drought caused by the same thing. One of their fishing boats chased out of international waters by that damn monitoring brigade.

He sighed, rubbing under his eyepatch.

One foreign broadcaster couldn't dispense the thick fog of lies and slander America had spun around him over what was nearing the past century. The only thing that could alleviate it was if the American people had their own revolution, fixed their country, and stopped using it to police and exploit others.

Which they would *never* do if every American that hated what they did fled instead of staying to fight to change things.

'I can't take America anymore,' the woman had said to him, her words desperate and scared. *'The things he's doing, and getting his people to do... I can't take it.'*

'Join the club,' North thought bitterly, then shook his head.

They would weather this, as they did everything. He would never stop fighting for his and his people's freedom and Reunification.

Never.

This woman was just another stressor on him, but she could be a *useful* stressor. The sooner they found out whether or not she was an enemy agent, the sooner he could get her out of his house. Then she could be useful at a distance, which was the best kind of useful.

North groaned, rubbing his scar again.

Ssi-bal, he was *definitely* going to regret this.

If you ever read Safeway Pyongyang (and especially if you are reading Chasing Liberty) and wondered 'Why would Comrade Suspicious-Prickly-and-Paranoid let a random woman who is possibly an enemy spy stay in his house in the first place? ' then this is the reason!

Possessive

[image]

[image]

I think North and China are both the possessive type, but literally only in their relationship. North isn't overly possessive with Y/N because he would hate if she was possessive with him, and he's assured in their relationship. And China isn't possessive with any women he's with because those aren't actually relationships. This is inspired by those news headlines that say things like 'China worried by increasingly close relationship between DPRK and Korea' or 'Beijing jealous of Pyongyang's closeness with Moscva.' Which are stupid because its actually possible for a country to have bilateral relations with more than one other country, shocking, I know. (it's a tactic to make it seem like there's a rift between the DPRK and their allies when there's really not- starting a war with them is considered less irresponsible if the masses think China isn't on their side). Also hey. Why are you anthropomorphizing countries, media? That's my job.

But my in-universe reason for it is because North is China's only real friend and China is North's. Not comrade or ally, or fellow anti-Imperialist, but actual friend. (Russia is in a weird place because he's more of a little brother, and he's also not Socialist). Not that either of them would ever admit that out loud, and North wouldn't even do it in his head. But they are. And China is incredibly protective of those he considers his people. Meanwhile North used to be less possessive of him, but after they reunite, there's a kind of fear he might stop talking to him again, and it doesn't help that China frequently says things like 'I'm having a talk with your brother next week. Maybe we'll get drinks,' and 'Who says I visit your country so much for you? I'm here for your women.' North knows he's teasing him when he says this, but it does make him insecure. Not that he's consciously aware of that. If he was forced to

think about how he feels, he would probably justify it by saying that he needs a good relationship with China to bypass the sanctions and keep his people healthy and happy (never mind that even when China stopped talking to him, his support never wavered). But he doesn't think about it, and he has no idea that his hackles go up when someone approaches China.

They don't interact much when they're at UN meetings or Countryhuman affairs because North hates giving anyone (America) a chance to imply he's in any way under China's power, and China doesn't want anyone (America) to know that North is anything more than a strategic ally to him. But I think if they do interact and another country approaches, that country probably isn't going to last long in a conversation with the other death-glaring them. People that know them both well- Russia, Cuba, Vietnam, Palestine- have taken notice of this, but they all know it's best not to bring it up.

A Different 'You' (One-shot)

(alternate title: Korea's body dysmorphia featuring North's asexuality
Also warning this includes mentions of sexual trauma, it's not graphic and its talking about the trauma itself, not the events, but just so no one is unprepared to hear it mentioned)

20xx

Smooth blue flesh, unblemished by any scars.

It was what Korea's fingers told him as he trailed them along his broad chest, from the curve of his left collarbone to the sharp ribs on his right side.

It was what his eye told him, too, looking in the body-length mirror in the bathing room. His reflection's torso was unmarred from the skin of his neck to the waistband of the black trousers that he had pulled on to sleep in.

But his mind told them that they were both wrong. It said that his fingers should be rippling over a thick cord of scar tissue that rose and fell like mountain ridges across his chest. It said that his eye should be seeing that scar- dark pink and red where the rest were shades of blue- stretching across him, an undeniable monument to what the Japanese Empire had done to his country.

More than that, it said that his entire body was wrong.

There should have been more scars, hundreds of them. Slashes from blades, circular, puckered wounds from bullets, old shiny patches from burns, uncountable nicks and cuts from a life spent fighting and building. The only ones he had now were on his hands, earned from participating in the rebuilding of Pyongyang, and other places in his country that had been struck during the Anti-Imperialist People's War For Liberation and Reunification, or World War III or Our War or whatever the rest of the world was calling it.

He shoved away the part of his brain that tried to see a more slender, flawless white chest. That wasn't what was wrong.

His mind said that his body wasn't tall enough or short enough. It was off in either direction by a fraction of a centimeter, not enough to be seen, but enough to be *felt.* It said the muscles etched into his skin should be harsher, honed over decades of battle and training. This body had been at war, but it had not been *to* war- the muscles hadn't been forged in actual experience, even though the memory of those experiences lingered. It said he wasn't skinny enough, that his bones weren't visible enough. Part of that was that with the sanctions lifted, he could import more supplies to grow more food for his people, and he could force himself to eat more often than he had before. But the other part was that he had been formed with more fat on him than North, and hadn't gone through the years of starving himself that had leeched any excess.

He had never *enjoyed* looking that way. It had been a reflection of what his people were being denied by America and his fellow Imperialists, now dethroned and toppled. He hadn't been able to look at his body the way it was.

But it had been *his* body. That vicious scar that made his people think of what had been done to him, made them know he was vulnerable the few times any of them had seen it, had been a shame. But it had been *his.* Every old scar from a knife, shrapnel, or firearm had been a sign that he hadn't been quick enough, smart enough, *strong* enough. But they were from *his* experiences, signs that he had lived and fought and bled with his people for over a hundred years.

Even South had had scars, though he had used gallons of lotions and ointments and eccentric home remedies over the decades to remove them, grinding away those whip marks and cuts from Japan's fists, and especially that little circle right under his heart. The one that could have only come from a bullet. Sanding himself down until the only mark left was inside.

Even the scar over his eye was off. When South had attacked North, the blow had been wild, afraid, not entirely sure of what he was doing. Coming from his left hand, it had slashed across his

brother's eye from right to left, off-center and shallow.

Korea could remember that moment from two perspectives. He could see his brother realize what he had done to him, reeling away, his remaining eye wide with shock and fury, betrayal pouring from it while blood gushed from the other. And he could see his brother realize what he had done, eyes wide as he looked down at the blade in his hand, blood dripping from it down to the forest floor. The memories doubled in a blend of rage, horror, and heartbreak, the first real crossing of the line.

But when America had taken Korea's eye, he had been fully committed. He had plunged that military dagger in with a vengeance, trying to reach his brain. It had left a mark smaller than South's-

*'I(He) didn't **want** to do it!'*

*'He(I) **did.**'*

-only reaching a few centimetres above his empty lids in a perfect vertical line.

The body in the mirror twisted to become even more foreign to him, disconnected from the mind observing it. His skin was the wrong colour now, even when it was right; he was too bulky; his ribs and hipbones stuck out hideously; he was too hard, had too much muscle, it wasn't a good look for an idol; he was too soft, he hadn't been through the combat needed to turn a soldier's body into a living weapon.

It wasn't North's body, it wasn't South's, and it wasn't-

"Korea?"

Korea whirled around, fangs bared, before realizing it was only Y/N, finished with brushing her teeth. He looked away, chagrined.

"Are you alright?" she asked, padding across the white and teal-tiled floor to his side. She made no move to touch him, which he was grateful for.

"Fine," he clipped. His chest stung, and for the first time, he realized that he had been scratching at it, digging his nails in like South had used to do and he tried so hard not to. "I'm... sorry for snarling at you."

It was still difficult for him to apologize for things. North rarely ever had with words, seeing them as meaningless. Apologizing had been second nature to South, but *meaning* those apologies hadn't been.

"It's fine," Y/N said, smiling. "I shouldn't have snuck up on you."

"You didn't," he told her, prying his nails out of his palm. "I was looking in the mirror."

He went to put his eyepatch back on, then stopped. It was the new flag, the flag of Korea, not the DPRK, and he knew that looking at it on his face would just make him feel even more ill at ease in his flesh. He shoved it in his pocket again.

Y/N hummed skeptically. Her reflection leaned a little closer to his, and he held his ground, giving her permission to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Do I need to save the mirror from you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Tch." He looked away. "No."

This was far from the first time this feeling of wrongness had come over him. A few months ago he had been bathing, and had forgotten to cover the reflective surface. Catching a glimpse of his full body in it while changing had been too much, and he had decided that he needed to remove it.

Maybe not *all* of the scars on his hands came from hard work.

"Who told you about that?" he demanded, suddenly wondering how she knew.

"Uhhhh."

"Gyeonggi," he growled, not needing an answer.

The short man had been the only one to see him disposing of the evidence. And with his light-mouth, now the entire high-rise likely knew. He needed to drill secrecy into him if he was ever going to have a proper government role.

"Please don't kill him," Y/N said, confirming his words. "He meant well."

"He can *'mean well'* from Ryanggang's farm."

Korea gave his discordant reflection one last glance, then threw on his old white workshirt and picked up his dayclothes from the bench. He had already scrubbed his teeth for several minutes earlier, so he was able to tip his head at Y/N, silently questioning her.

She linked their arms in answer, following him out of the bathing room and up to their floor.

As they passed the stairs, he could hear music drifting up from the floor below.

"South Pyongan and Chungbuk," he noted, annoyed. It was too late for them to be playing it so loudly.

"Just leave them," Y/N urged, tugging on his sleeve. "South Chungcheong will probably tell them to be quiet soon anyways."

She gave a quick look around, cringing like she was afraid of summoning the woman with her name.

"A-And it's Moranbong Band, anyway," she added cheerfully, dragging him for the stairs. "So it's fine! Patriotic!"

Korea huffed, but let her haul him up the stairs, deciding that she was right, and he didn't want to subject her to a run-in with his less-than-friendly province tonight.

He couldn't risk running into South Chungcheong, either. Or any of them. Not when he was like this.

"Are you working tonight?" Y/N asked, pausing in the doorway to the bedroom.

Korea looked to the door of his office, then shook his head. "No."

He wanted to, to lose himself in the reports and numbers and meeting summaries. It had always made North feel better to ignore his own problems by focusing on ones that he could solve.

But if his attention started to wander, like South's always did, and he found himself feeling bored for even a second, he knew it would just sever his connection to his body even more.

He followed Y/N in, not bothering to turn on the lamp, since she was already dressed in her warm nightgown. The light of the almost full moon coming in the window was enough, anyways.

Korea's hand twitched to toss his clothes to the floor, and he gritted his teeth. Instead, he folded them neatly, placing them near the door to be given to the washerwomen at the end of the week. Or maybe he would do them himself, the old-fashioned way. It might make his hands feel more like his if he was dipping them into cold water to scrub his clothes, like North had during the Anti-Japanese People's War.

Or maybe it would make the distance between them feel even wider.

Y/N was already in bed, and she watched him place his eyepatch delicately on the night table, pattern down.

The Countryhuman cupped a hand over his missing eye for a second, then shook his head, joining his girlfriend. He didn't need the old star eyepatch in his drawer. It was a crutch, and North had never needed crutches.

Y/N rested her head on his smooth shoulder, curling her legs up so her knees were pressed to his too-bony not-enough side.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked quietly.

"I've told you, don't worry about me," he replied gruffly. "I need

to work through it by myself."

"You don't need to."

"I have to." It wasn't something that she or any of his provinces, or even his Supreme Leader could work through with words. Maybe Kim Il-sung could have, if he were still here.

Korea tipped his head back to the wall, seeing the portrait of his long-dead friend smiling down at him, and felt tears try to well to his eye. He clamped them down.

'Curse South and his fucking waterworks.'

But without his General, he had to forge through this on his own. The contradictions of his two halves were his to solve and fit together in the way that was best for their country. And even if he could admit that it was better to face things together than alone, Korea still could not go running to others with his problems. No matter how much he loved them.

"I understand," Y/N murmured, stroking her fingers along the fabric of his shirt that covered his unscarred chest.

With her past, there was a chance that she did. If not what exactly he was going through, then having problems that could only be solved by you.

Korea pulled her closer, letting her caress him a bit more.

"Would it help if I said I think you're really pretty?" she asked after a moment.

"How many times have I told you not to say weird things?" he muttered, tilting his face away so she wouldn't feel it heat up.

"Umm, at least twice." Y/N sat up a little, her expression just visible in the moonlight as she smiled down at him. "Does that mean calling you the most beautiful man I've ever seen isn't allowed?"

"So long as it isn't reactionary rhetoric, I won't limit what you

say," the Countryhuman grumbled.

Y/N nodded sagely. "Then you are. The most gorgeous man I've ever seen. *Veeeery* pretty."

Korea grabbed her pillow, pressing it over his face in a childish motion he couldn't help. "I hate when you do this."

Since he had firmly told her she was *not* allowed to compliment him in front of the others, at risk of being sent to find out what exactly working for eight hours a day in the fields with Ryanggang for a month was like, she had evidently decided that she should compliment him as much as possible when they were alone.

North had never received words like hers before, and they had always managed to shake him to his core, even when he didn't quite believe them. Korea wasn't sure he believed them, either, but he was *definitely* affected by them, even moreso now that he was Reunified. South had been used to physical compliments and being fawned over by models, but his deep-seated desire to be adored, and his even deeper vanity had only added to his brother's... character flaw.

"I think you li-ike it," Y/N sing-songed, pressing a kiss to his shoulder, then to his cheek once she had weaselled her face under the pillow, too. "My beautiful, beautiful boyfriend~"

She showered him with praise and his face with kisses, once she had stolen the pillow from him. Her knee slid over his leg, and she paused, waiting. Korea was careful not to move in any way to discourage her, so she finished the movement, straddling him now as she continued her attack.

"You're embarrassing yourself," he growled, face hot enough to melt steel as he tried to defend himself (lacklustredly, though he wouldn't admit that).

"I should be embarrassed when we go out," she corrected, touching her lips to his cheek again. "It's embarrassing to have your boyfriend be prettier than you."

"I'm not 'pretty,'" he denied. "I am a *man."*

"Mhm, I know." Y/N sat back, wiggling a little to let him know how *well* she knew that, making him give up on grabbing her wrists to cover his face. "You need to start wearing a bag on your head when we're in public together."

Aside from how much he enjoyed it when Y/N praised him, North had discovered some other... unfortunate things about himself while learning how to please her. Things that had also unfortunately carried over to Korea. And with how she was pinning his wrists above his head and sitting on top of him, light enough that he could escape if he had to, but still... *very much* on top of him, those things were starting to get to him.

"You're insane," he forced out. "You're much more pretty than me."

He wished he could find better compliments. North had never had to speak to anyone that way, and he had always found himself lacking when it came to her. Apologies, condolences, and flirting were... all things he was less than skilled at.

South had been a flirt. He had always thought he learned it from watching America, but Korea was sure there had always been a seed of it in there. Wheedling with their guards and making big eyes at North to manipulate them had naturally turned to flashing his teeth at fans and flattering fellow celebrities.

But Korea didn't want to manipulate Y/N or just tell her what he knew she wanted to hear. He wanted to... He didn't know. Make her feel like he did when she was doing this.

"You're so cute when you're shy," the woman sitting on him cooed, and he was being forced to look at her again as his hands were gently peeled away from his face. He could have shut his eye, but... He didn't want to.

She grinned down at him, her hair mussed and hanging over them like curtains. She wasn't as confident as she was pretending to be- even in the silver light, he could see that her cheeks didn't match

the rest of her face.

Ssi-bal, she really was gorgeous. Breath-taking, like Paektusan in winter.

He felt that strange sensation, a spark in the pit of his stomach, and it made him squeeze his eye shut, trying to refocus himself as he felt something he still wasn't used to, and who he wanted to be never had.

Through North's entire life, he had never felt attracted towards anyone. He had always felt that it was because he couldn't be attracted to his people because they were his. He was their country, and any personal romantic relationship or attraction between him and them would be inherently unequal. And why would he ever be attracted to a *foreigner?*

He had *thought* he was attracted to Y/N. He knew couples slept together, and he had wanted to be closer to her, so much so that he had done something he had never desired or thought he would. It had felt good, and he enjoyed... *that* with her. So he had assumed he had finally experienced what China and Russia gossiped about.

North had always thought the two men were purposefully trying to tease him when they would double-take a woman on the street (which one of them was *far* more subtle about), or talk about the attractiveness of strangers that they hadn't even spoken to until he had to shut them down. Or when Russia would complain about letting a woman whose personality he hasn't liked take him home, and his defense, when North told him to simply *not* do that, had been 'I couldn't help it!'

But Korea had South's memories now, and he knew that as North, he hadn't been attracted to Y/N, not in the way South had been attracted to his girlfriends or other idols, and not in the way that China and Russia likely were to women.

He had thought she was beautiful, wanted to touch her and be close to her, and make her feel good. He had loved her. But that feeling in the stomach had never been there, that pull that said South wanted to sleep with someone and made him wonder what it

would be like, that feeling that Korea did have now, but only for Y/N. He still couldn't understand how someone could find a person they knew nothing about attractive. Or someone that they outright disliked.

If North had known that he really was different than his comrades, and his brother, and perhaps most men, it would have made him beyond smug. It was the exact confirmation he needed that he was superior in every single way, not a slave to his body like them.

If Korea was being honest, it made him smug, too. Not only did he have better self-control than China and Russia, but he didn't have anything to control at all.

But it also made him feel a little... guilty, that as North he hadn't been attracted to Y/N in the same way that she was to him. He couldn't tell her that. Even he realized that wasn't something you admitted to a woman.

And he *was* attracted to her now. Just her. So it didn't matter.

Y/N was still kissing him, his forehead, his cheeks, the white and red bands that crossed his face, everywhere but where he wanted her to.

Then she pressed her lips to the scar across his eye, as gently as she had touched it that night in his office, making him melt.

Okay. He wanted her to kiss there, too.

She smiled teasingly down at him, pecking one corner of his mouth, than the other, shifting her grip on his wrists as she leaned forward. She paused, as if deciding whether or not to continue.

Korea huffed in impatience, craning his neck up. Y/N didn't retreat, and he was allowed to finally kiss her lips, warmth flooding through his body as for a moment he felt like it was his again.

But as he closed his eye, melding into Y/N, memories started to pluck at his subconscious. *South's* memories.

He tried to claw them back, to remain in the moment as UIP had coached him, but he had made the mistake of thinking about South and attraction and now it was too late.

South, his lips pressed to some popstar's neck backstage; South, high on benzos and being led to a bedroom in a house he wasn't sure was his; South cuddling with one of his girlfriends in bed and knowing he had to break up with her because there was no way she would like him now that she had spent this much time with him, but wanting to cling onto her for as long as possible; South, sitting nervously on a bed in a hotel while a woman named 'Satang' told him to relax, knowing that America was right outside and he had to go through with it because his friend had spent his money and if he didn't his manhood would be put to question. Sex with too many strangers and too many people that had only wanted his- *South's* money or the status that came with sleeping with him.

They were just flashes, brief resurgences of memory that Korea tried desperately to shove back down, to shred into pieces. But they were enough to make his chest tighten and his skin crawl, and now it didn't feel like his chest or his skin, but someone else's that Y/N was touching.

His breath caught in his throat, and he cursed internally. South had had panic attacks, it was why he had started taking benzodiazepines in the first place. Korea had never had them, but the fear that he would start only made his chest tighter.

He wouldn't panic, not in front of Y/N, not in front of anyone. He was stronger than South, he wouldn't-

"Korea?"

For the second time that night, Korea found himself being snapped back into reality, though not focus. He suddenly felt that his entire body was tense, muscles trembling under Y/N, and that he had stopped kissing her back.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked, releasing his wrists, allowing him to cross his arms tight over his chest.

'If you say yes, she's going to leave you,' his inner voice whispered, and even if it hadn't been speaking in third person, he would have known it came from the part that had been South.

Luckily, North had never had a problem with making it known when he didn't want to do something.

"Yes," he managed, disgusted to hear how tight and shaky his voice was.

Y/N immediately slipped off of him, her brows crinkled in concern. "Do you want me to leave or stay?"

'Go,' the part of him that was North urged. *'I don't want her to see me like this.'*

Korea gritted his teeth, making himself say, "Stay. Please."

North wouldn't have wanted her to leave, anyways. He just wouldn't have wanted to *ask* her to stay.

Y/N nodded, brushing a strand of hair from her face, still achingly beautiful to him, even in the depths of his fit. "Are you okay to touch right now?"

Sometimes when this feeling came over him, he was okay to cuddle her still. But not tonight. The discordance of his reflection with his mind, on top of... *this* was too much.

"No," he said, turning his head away. "Sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," she soothed, not for the first time.

"I know." He did. It was that stupid little voice that sounded more like South than him that didn't.

Y/N shimmied to the far side of the futon, laying down and pulling the blanket over her and him, careful not to brush his body as she did. She faced him, resting her cheek on the back of her hand, watching him with caring eyes.

Korea squeezed his shut, trying to take deep breaths and lock away South's *stupid fucking memories,* his fingers dug into his arms.

It was stupid to feel this way. It wasn't him that had slept with all those people, and it hadn't even been South that had hired 'Satang,' whose real name Korea had never been able to find. Just like it hadn't been Korea that had ordered the bombing of the Hangang Bridge, or ordered Communist prisoners of war killed, or turned over Kim Ok-ju. It had been South.

But South was a part of him, an entire half. And he had the memories and the feelings when he had done those things, even if they were foreign and incomprehensible to him now. He still couldn't escape the feeling that their people's blood was on his hands, because *South* had never been able to. It was what he had been running from with every concert, every party and hook-up and drug.

And he couldn't escape the feeling that the hands of strangers were on 'his' body, and he didn't know what made him feel dirtier- that he hadn't wanted to sleep with any of them or asked for these memories, or that he felt like *he* had taken advantage of *them,* because South had been famous and their country and he had paid for 'Satang.' Or that there were people of his out there that knew what it was like to sleep with him, or a part of him.

It felt violating. And it was unfair. All those years with his bodies' autonomy completely stripped by Japan, and that had been the one thing that had never happened to them. North had kept his body. So why had South-

"Korea," Y/N's soft voice said. "Don't hurt yourself."

He had been scratching at his eye scar, harder than he should have. He brought his hand down, trapping both of them in his armpits, his ribs creaking as he wrapped his arms protectively around them.

His body didn't feel like his and now he didn't *want* it to. He wanted North's back, with its scars and sharp bones and the only memories of sex good ones with Y/N that didn't seep into his head

at the worst times and make him want to split his skull open to dig them out. He had always been comfortable in his body, because even when he didn't consider himself attractive, even when he couldn't look at it, he had controlled it and it had been *his*.

South had been the one insecure in his skin, who considered himself good-looking, but never *enough,* who threw up when he ate too much and followed those torturous idol diets in order to keep looking good for his fans. Who wished that he had double-lids and was tall like America. And who couldn't help being attracted to strangers, so long as they were hot.

Feeling like this now just made Korea feel more like South, which just made his memories stronger. And as awful as the sexual memories were for him, they were better than the ones where he had hurt their people, either directly or indirectly, the ones that haunted him most.

"Korea," Y/N said, worriedly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he panted, ribs aching. "You can go to sleep."

"Talk to me."

"No."

What was he supposed to say? 'I'm having flashbacks of every person part of me slept with that isn't you?' He didn't want to upset her, or put these thoughts into her head so she could suffer with him. North had never cared about her past with America, beyond what he had done to her, but Korea knew that South would have. He would have constantly been comparing himself to him, wondering if she had liked the American more.

That stupid question, the one that was always on the tip of his tongue, rose into his mouth like vomit. He choked it down.

He couldn't see into Y/N's mind- even though she had said he had him beat when it came to past partners, what if she couldn't help but do the same? Comparing herself to strangers that couldn't compete with her, especially when he hadn't wanted to be with

them in the first place.

"This is my problem," he said to her through gritted teeth. "Don't worry about it."

"Korea." There was a rustle as she sat up. "We've been over this. They're *our* problems. No Communism joke. You're my boyfriend and I love you, and *my* problems basically put us into World War III. You can talk to me."

"I can't," he said tightly, turning his face from her to smother in the pillow.

More words rose in his throat. *'I don't deserve you, you should break up with me.'* But he managed to force them away. He knew if she had been too stubborn to break up with him when he had first Reunified, she wouldn't now.

'Wouldn't she?' the inner voice that had belonged to South asked. *'Maybe she's got to know you now, and she knows you're nothing like North. You don't want to have sex with her and you won't even tell her what's going on. She's probably hoping you'll break up with her, so* ***she*** *won't look like the bad guy.'*

He wouldn't fall into South's habits by replying. Even though he really wanted to tell himself to shut the fuck up.

He was just trying to run, like he had with all his girlfriends, or anyone that got too close to him. 'It's not you, it's me,' and it was- it was South fleeing because when people got too close they realized he was a mess, so it was better to keep them at arm's length, where he was pretty and shiny and fun, nothing like his sour, boring, lunatic brother.

Korea wouldn't let that part of him win. South had lost- he wouldn't let him sabotage his relationship with Y/N now, or hurt her.

"I want to," he told Y/N, his words muffled by the pillow. "I don't. I *can't."*

"It's alright," she soothed, tucking the baknket back over him

where it had fallen. "You don't have to. But you can."

It should be him comforting her. It was his job to be strong and unshakeable, and *he* should be the one reassuring *her*.

"Korea," Y/N ventured after a few minutes of him trying to unsuccessfully center himself. "Are you feeling okay to answer a kind of... really private question?"

"...What is it?" he asked after a moment, since because she had mentioned it, he now had to know.

"America never..." There was a brief rustle as she fidgeted. "He never... *did* anything to South, did he?"

Korea took a moment to absorb the meaning of the words. When he did, he shot up, shocked back into stability for a moment.

"No!" he cried, with North's outrage at the idea and South's indignation. "He wouldn't-"

He cut himself off from an involuntary defense of his worst enemy. He would. If South had been formed a woman, he probably would have. And South probably would have let him, too scared to say no, as always.

And the part of him that was South quieted, because part of *him* had known that.

Y/N winced at his shout. "Sorry, but with Ukraina and- Well, I just... wanted to make sure."

"He didn't," Korea repeated, calmer.

'Thank the General.' If he had to live with memories like *that* of America, a man and *the* man that had slaughtered millions of his people, he wouldn't have wanted to. But he would have *had* to carry on for his people, living with those thoughts forever.

He never would have been free of America, even with his death.

"Okay, good." Y/N said, relieved. "But still, I..." She fiddled with

the ends of her hair. "I want you to know you're not responsible for any of South's actions. Or anything that... happened to him."

"Nothing like that happened," he replied blankly.

That was why it was so stupid for him to feel violated. South had never been assaulted. When he was drunk or high, the women he was with usually were, too. Even when he didn't want to have sex with them, they thought he did because he *acted* like he did. Even if Korea couldn't stand those memories and would have disdained the personalities of those women if he had met them, they were still his people. He couldn't fault them for being so starstruck by their Countryhuman that they couldn't see through his well-practiced facade of people-pleasing.

If anything, South had been the- The North part of him bit his tongue. His brother had been manipulated, scared, too spineless to say no. He couldn't call him that, even if 'Satang' had been paid for, even if he had been leveraging his position and power.

But he felt it. Especially around SH. Would she hate him if she knew that part of him had bought a woman's body? He hated himself for it, there was no reason she shouldn't.

There was. It hadn't been him. North would have never, and *he* would never.

But his mind said that he had.

"I am not a victim." If South and his constant need to be one hadn't seen himself that way, then he definitely couldn't.

"There wouldn't be anything wrong with you if you were," Y/N said gently.

There was too much compassion in her eyes. He had to look away.

"Korea is not and I won't be." He stared put the window at the square of silvery sky. "I just..."

He curled his knees up to his chest, unable to help himself.

"This was supposed to be different. *I* was supposed to be different. The Reunification was supposed to fix... my country."

And it had. He had enough farmland to feed his people now, with more land reclamation projects coming, and he could freely fish the seas and trade. Even if he lost CCCP and China's support in the future, they could sustain themselves. His people all got to enjoy the benefits of a Socialist system- six to eight hour workdays, completely free healthcare, free housing, full childcare and robust revolutionary education. The chaebols were gone and even the cults that had sunk their claws deep into society were being stamped out. With the United Nations and its Security Council resolutions dissolved, they could travel, and with the threat of America's colour revolutions gone, they could use the Soviet internet. And despite being a Soviet republic, he had autonomy, and could vote to leave if his people wanted to.

Even if the integration of his people in the North and South hadn't been as seamless as he had thought and hoped for, it was happening.

They were free. Finally, *free.* Things were getting better. They already were.

So why wasn't he?

To North, the Reunification had always been about the big picture- a free, independent, Unified Korea, like they were supposed to be. Whatever happened to him was secondary.

Y/N had changed that. She had made him want to stay North, even as Korea.

But before that, there had been moments where even when he had refused to consider the negative changes that could happen to him, the positive had tempted him. When he had watched SH and the others dance with their people at the mass dances, and secretly hoped that one day he could make himself join them. Or when Hae hugged him, and he wished he could just hug her back without shoving her away. Or when China gave him that silent look, asking him if he would sleep on the floor with him like they had used to,

and he wanted nothing more than to say yes.

What happened to him was secondary. The only thing that mattered was that he was fit to lead their country. But if taking in South's light-heartedness and ability to be open would also let him do those other things... He had thought it would be acceptable.

And for South the Reunification had *always* been about them. About being one with his brother, being with him forever, taking in his confidence and charisma and ability to be loved and respected that he craved so desperately. Being like North, but better, in a way that North would have found worse.

Instead, South had been crushed and North had won, and Korea had been left with their jumbled up complexes, personality disorders, and contradicting, confusing emotions. He was no longer as unerringly confident as North had been, and no longer as outgoing as South had been. Even when his people now all had food, he couldn't make himself eat more than two meals on a good day. He could call his provinces by their nicknames, but he still couldn't hold them like he wanted to. He still hadn't been able to accept China's wordless offer, and even when he was attracted to Y/N in the way she deserved, he couldn't satisfy her because when her skin touched his, all those *stupid* decisions South had made and situations he had been forced into came flooding back in, making him spiral like this.

"The Reunification was supposed to fix *me,"* he rasped, despising how his voice hitched, and how he hadn't meant to say that out loud.

'South's stupid light-mouth.'

"You weren't broken," Y/N said softly, looking at him gently. Never pityingly, which was the only reason he didn't bolt from the room now.

Korea didn't respond, his teeth grating together.

He had been. Not just Divided. Even before the Division, he and South had been broken. By Japan, by the Occupation, by leaving his

brother and being left, and later by the war and America, by what they had been made to do and had chosen to do, by the Arduous March and martial law and decades of Southern military dictatorships and Northern sanctions. By fame and fear and a slowly tightening noose and losing the one person he could fully confide in.

North had refused to ever accept breaking. He had healed around the breaks, sharp and jagged, refusing to acknowledge what they were and using his edges to fight for their people. But South had known he was broken. He had known his brother was, too. He had let the blows hit him, pounding him into something soft and malleable, something that could be pummeled into whatever you wanted it to be, made to do whatever you wanted it to, because at least it didn't hurt as much.

How was Korea supposed to reconcile that within him? He was too soft to be North, and too hard to be South. While North's personality may have been dominant in him, when the parts of South that bubbled up were things he never wanted to be, and actions that had haunted *South,* let alone him, how could he reconcile that?

How could he ever just be *him?*

"Korea," Y/N said, shifting closer, but still not touching him. "You weren't broken. And you aren't."

"I don't *want* to be," he growled, holding his head in his hands. "I just want to be *me* again."

"You as in you, or as in North?"

North. He wished he could have just killed South. Even when he knew that would have hung over him forever, at least it would have hung over *him.*

"You said you couldn't be him again," Y/N reminded him. "And you don't have to be."

"I *want* to be." His voice caught, and he had to swallow before he

could say, "I want to stop feeling this way, I want to get rid of these stupid memories, I want my body to be mine again, and I want to be *me."*

He was saying too much.

Korea lay down and rolled over, putting his back to her. "I'm going to sleep."

At least there he could escape the memories clamouring for his attention. And when he woke up, the gate would be back down, and easier to keep that way.

And he could have a bath. He had always understood why SH liked to immerse herself in ice water and scrub until her skin bled. Now he would try it. Maybe it would help.

"You *are* you," Y/N insisted, not letting him run away. "Just because you aren't the same as before, doesn't mean you aren't you. I'm not the same me I used to be, before I left Detroit, or before I came here. But I'm still me."

"It's different," he muttered. "I'm *literally* not who I was anymore. I'm a whole new Countryhuman."

"But you're still *you.* You're the person SH makes go on walks to talk to people with her when you're working too much, and you're the person that Hae pesters until you let her hug you. You're the person who walks directly into a crowd to let them celebrate with you on Foundation Day."

He felt her finger indent the pillow behind his head, nudging him without contact.

"And you're the person who gives half of their breakfast to Gyeonggi, even when we tell you to eat more." The teasing lilt left her voice. "And you're the person I fell in love with. And the one I want to stay with. I don't think you're broken, Yeobo."

Heat exploded in Korea's face at the term of endearment, and his shock swept away his turmoil for the briefest second as he whipped around to stare at her with a wide eye. He couldn't bring himself to

respond.

After a moment, Y/N asked, "If Dividing Korea again would turn you back into North, would you do it?"

"No," he said, overcoming his flabbergasted embarrassment to reply immediately. "It doesn't matter what I feel. A Unified Korea is what's best for my people."

For them, he would tolerate these memories. He would tolerate feeling disgusted and violated and not like himself, so long as the Korean people could live happy fulfilling lives in the country they were meant to.

"There." Y/N nodded like her point had been proven. "Would South have said something like that?"

"No," he muttered, looking away.

"Exactly. You're not him, and nothing he did was your decision." She hesitated, glancing down at her clasped hands. "I know... words don't really fix things. And there aren't really any actions that can, either. I still have... complicated feelings about my mom, and my childhood, and... him. America. And everything else that happened. And I think I probably always will. And you probably will, too."

Forever. He had to carry this with him forever.

"Things don't just go away," she murmured, and the look in her eyes made him reach out and put a hand over hers, even though the skin on it crawled. She smiled at him, waveringly. "But they get smaller. You move past them, eventually. Trust me. It gets easier to stop thinking about them."

Korea put another hand over hers, holding it, looking at her fingers instead of her face, covered in scars and calluses like his, nothing like the soft hands she had arrived in Pyongyang with.

"You've only been Reunified for a few years," she continued. "And since you're pretty much immortal, you'll have a long time to move past it."

He swallowed thickly. "Y/N..."

"Don't," she said softly, adding her other hand to the tangle. "Until then, I'm sure being who you are will make things easier than trying to be a you you're not. If you can't be North again, then just be *you,* Korea."

He squeezed his eye shut, and her fingers.

"And I'll be here for you," she murmured, squeezing back. "Just like you were for me. No matter what."

"You're..." Korea swallowed again, avoiding her eyes. "Really annoying."

She huffed in amusement. "So I've heard."

"I'm going to sleep." He disentangled his hands from her, turning to face the window again.

He could hear her lying back down, snuggling under the covers.

"Could you... press your back to mine?" he asked, his voice too small. It was embarrassing to ask for, even if she wouldn't understand why he was.

Y/N wriggled over, pressing her spine to his, warm and solid. He let out a little sigh, some of the tension going out of his body. A body that felt a little more like his than it had a second again as both halves of him were soothed by the familiar feeling.

Despite knowing that words changed nothing... Hers had comforted him.

Korea would overcome this, as he overcame everything. Even if they had been broken, North and South had both made it to Reunification. And even if it hadn't taken place like they had hoped or been what they imagined, they had still become Korea.

He would carry on, no matter what he had to face. He would keep forging down the path North had set out on over a century ago, leading their people along it, regardless of if he was broken or not.

If who he was could march on through war and famine, all while carrying the lives of millions on his shoulders, who he was now couldn't let something as trivial as memories and feelings affect him.

Freedom hadn't been the end of the road. It never really would end. And Korea needed to be him to keep guiding his people down it. He needed to be *Korea.* For his people, those alive and the millions that had sacrificed themselves for a golden future. For his provinces, for his Supreme Leader, for his Party. For his General, who had believed in him.

"Y/N," he whispered after awhile.

"Mm?" she asked sleepily, pressing closer to him.

"I don't think you know what 'yeobo' means."

"Oh? Sorry, I thought it meant like 'honey' or 'darling. I've heard a few women call their husbands that."

"Yes," he said, cheeks warm. *"Husbands."*

She was silent for a moment, then made a squeak of realization. He felt her draw her legs up to her chest, hiding in them.

"I'm so sorry!" she rushed. "I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," he cut her off. "Just don't mention this around South Pyongan. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Yeah, of course, sorry."

"But," he added, after a beat of embarrassed silence from both of them. "I didn't... mind it."

There was another, longer silence. Then Y/N ventured, "Are you...?"

"We'll talk about this another day." When he was clearer-headed, and there was no doubt the body that took her hand belonged to him.

"Alright."

There was a barely restrained note of joy to her voice. Ssi-bal, he was going to have SH trying to sneak his new suit measurements soon, wasn't he?

"I love you, Korea."

"I love you, too," he murmured, barely able to get the words past his swollen heart.

He closed his eye, going through the breathing exercises UIP had taught him, trying to lock away the parts of South he didn't want.

He wasn't him, but he knew he had to accept the Countryhuman *was* part of him, no matter how much he wanted to pretend he wasn't.

Korea was the boy who had left his most important person to fight for their people, the man that had put everything on the line time and time again to free their country, the man that, no matter how tough times became, kept striving for what was important to him, and to Korea, no matter what it cost him personally.

And Korea was also the boy that had stayed behind, too scared to step over the threshold. The one that had stayed with America because he thought winning was impossible. And the man that had thrown himself into music and parties and money while his people struggled, just to forget his own pain.

And he was neither of them. Not North or South, but *Korea.* And he would keep what he needed, and wanted, and lock the rest away. Part of who he was, but not part of *him.*

For Korea.

Y/N snuggled closer to him, the comforting touch that both North and South had always longer for, and had never gotten from each other before the end. The closest they had come was their bloodstained hands twined together on the cold, crimson-splattered floor, while they bled out from the wounds they had given each other.

Korea pressed back, warmth and contentment flooding his body.

'And for her.'

Actually, North being a bottom is incredibly important for his character because many people that have suffered from trauma, especially as a result of lack of autonomy and now need to have utter control over themselves and their lives receive a sense of comfort from being able to give that control up in a safe space, and since having control over himself is one of the most importamt things to North/Korea, the fact that he relinquishes part of it to Y/N not only shows that he's comfortable enough to do so, knowing she won't hurt him, but also shows that Y/N is confident enough in their relationship to take control, regaining her own autonomy that America took from her.

***I put down my psychology textbook, remove my glasses and delicately place them beside it, walking away* Session over, see you next week.**

You walk over to the book and see that not only was I holding it upside down, but I was clearly just writing 'Pyongyang goes woke' in the margins in splendid calligraphy.

How did I get in your kitchen?

(also Korea is sort of victim-blaming South/himself, while also denying he was a victim when sometimes he really was. But he's also not holding South fully accountable for his actions, a leftover from him *and* North. I think I make that clear, but just in case here's the direct statement that he does not have a healthy mindset about the situation(s) and it should not be emulated)

More Genderbend!

[image] [image] [image] [image]

All of the genderbend provinces, as promised! Most of them would be the same as they are now, but SH and North Hamgyong would be very different people, since a lot of what made them who they are involved gender roles. Also Hae and Hwang's names would be switched, as in female Hwang would be called Hae, and male Hae would be called Hwang. To my memory I've never seen a North Korean man wear pink. I've see purple, but I don't think any pink. (edit: completely forgot that picture of Comrade Kim Il-sung in pink choson-ot; but traditional clothes have different social expectations than regular clothes) So male Hae's shirt will stay a colour that has plausible deniability, even though his room and all of his possessions are still pink. Chagangcansteponme.

Also I feel like I want to write another one-shot soon. I have a few options clawing at my brain. Would you like to see:

Kangwon coming out (like as gay)

North visiting China in his country and being a real bitch about it

The dubious day-adventure of SH, Pyo, and Hae in the 80s, where they talk about nepotism, shopping, and crimes that they most definitely did not commit. Slice of life making up for my stories probably not passing the Bechdel test (there's just so many men, and they all have important relationships with the women so get brought up a lot, I'm sorry, I can't help it. I mean I *was* directly responsible for choosing their genders but I really can't)

North Hamgyong interrogates the Jeollas post-Koreafication. And is also a real bitch about it.

North and China visit each other's dreams and get to be there for each other on one of the worst days of their respective lives. This would be my only non-canon bit, as I was thinking about it a few days ago and it made me cry. I am also a little bitch, but in a

different way.

Korea awkwardly asks China The Question that he won't ask Y/N. featuring the teleporting Mao mug.

I'll probably write all of these, but which would you comrades like to see first? It might influence me.

Hard To Say (One-shot, Part 1)

"So. Have you told him yet?"

Kangwon smiled up at UIP, who was sitting on the chair at his desk.

"Told who what?" At his... friend's dry look, the Korean province slumped, looking towards the emerald slopes of Kumgang-san, which were really just part of the mural SH had painted around the window on his wall.

"No," he admitted, nibbling on a fingernail. "I haven't found the right time."

"You have been searching for the right time since half a year ago," the Soviet Republic pointed out.

Ever since the fourth celebration of the end of the Anti-Imperialist People's War earlier in the year, when Kangwon and UIP had returned from the celebrations to talk in his room, and the Countryhuman had given in to something that had been tempting Kangwon for awhile, too, kissing him.

Now it was the day after the New Year, and Kangwon had still not told Korea that he liked men.

"Still haven't found it," he told the other man, shrugging.

"Well, hurry up," he whined, switching languages. "I want to be with you."

Kangwon raised his eyebrows, and he winced.

"When I speak in Hebrew about this, just ignore me," he said, embarrassed.

"I usually do."

The United Israeli-Palestinian Soviet Socialist Republic had stabilized fairly quickly with the removal of the dangerous elements, those Israelis who had been responsible for the genocide of the Palestinian people. With America no longer there to support them, they had quickly crumbled against the resistance from those who the land belonged to and who fought for their people, like the reactionaries had crumbled back in the Fatherland Liberation War.

But for the Countryhuman himself, stubborn traces of half of his old personality remained. Though he, too, had become stable. Kangwon never would have considered a relationship with him if he wasn't.

"I don't want you to tell him for me." UIP climbed off the chair to sit on the floor with him, taking his hands. "As another Countryhuman, I understand Korea most likely won't even let you have a relationship with me, and that even if we are together, we would have to keep it from our people. But you hiding it has been taking a toll on you."

Kangwon looked away as the gold-and-white-skinned man ran his fingerpads pointedly over the short, jagged nails on the province's fingers.

He'd never cared about hiding it before. He hadn't really *been* hiding it. It wasn't like anyone had ever asked him what his sexuality was. That wasn't a question you casually asked others, let alone someone who might be a personal comrade, but was also a government figure.

He'd never thought he would care about never telling anyone. Korea had never explicitly said not to have romantic (or otherwise) relationships with their people, but Kangwon knew he would have frowned on it. And he had been the one to tell his cousins to be careful if they did, not liking the idea of the power dynamics between them. When you grew up looking up to someone, seeing them as a national hero, a guide, and something more, it gave that person sway over you. It was fine for a friendship, but anything else would have been unhealthy. To his knowledge, none of his cousins had ever had relationships, casual or otherwise.

Aside from North Pyongan. And Korea had *not* liked that, and though he'd never outright forbidden them, it had been clear that courting foreign Provincehumans was never going to be approved of. Kangwon had never had any desire to, either. Most other countries were Imperialists bent on destroying them, and so were their subdivisions. And the few that weren't, Kangwon would only ever see on holidays where they invited foreign representatives, never long enough to form a bond.

And he was gay. There was that, too.

He'd never cared. There were more important things than romantic relationships. He had been working around the clock to keep his country free and happy, after all.

But things had changed. America was gone, and any would-be Imperialist replacements had China and CCCP to contend with. His people were Liberated, Reunified, and happy, and while they still had to strive and maneuver to keep them that way, staving off Soviet influence, the fight wasn't as bloody as before.

And he had grown close with UIP. He'd always like how peaceable and serene Palestine was, and had considered him a comrade. Now he had spent more time with that side of him, almost a year straight between when he had been brought to Pyongyang and when he left, since he had needed to be kept away from anything that was happening in his own Republic that might set off the Israel part of him (eventually Korea had put his foot down and excised all of their foreign allies, at which point, UIP had gone to stay with his Soviet 'father').

When he wasn't having one of his personality switches, he was soft and kind, and enjoyed hiking with Kangwon and hearing all about Korean flora and fauna (the few times Korea had let them go out unattended; he still wasn't entirely convinced UIP was going to 'Israel-out' as South Pyongan put it, and try to kill one of his provinces), and the Palestine half of him knew what it was like to wage a resistance war across decades. And he made *really* good knafeh.

Kangwon knew there was a large chance Korea wouldn't even let

him be with UIP. Even though they were both SSR's, Korea seemed to view Korean Soviet status as temporary, which meant at some point, UIP could be put even further into the 'threat' category than he already was.

But Kangwon... really liked him. He wanted to be with him. And he wouldn't even have a chance if he didn't tell Korea.

"I know," he sighed, examining his nails while UIP traced his lifelines. "I'll tell him. I just... What would *you* do if one of your provinces told you?"

"Lock them in a closet until they repented," UIP said bluntly in Hebrew before making a violent choking sound and returning to Arabic. "I mean, I would have told them it was their choice. Please pretend that's all I said."

Sometimes it was difficult to believe that the 'liking men' half of UIP's attraction to both sexes had come from Israel. *Very* difficult.

"But you've said Korea would not punish you," the Countryhuman pointed out. "We used to hear the slander against you, but you told me that no one cares so long as it stays private."

"Yeah, though it's... a little different for me," Kangwon said awkwardly. "Since I'm a Provincehuman, and the Supreme Minister of Forestry, Public Health, Land and- etcetera. I have a... code of conduct. I'm important."

Korea had always said so.

He pulled his hands free from UIP, using the few seconds of time before he took them again to nibble the nails even shorter.

"Yes, you are," he said sincerely, gazing into his eyes.

'Mmrrgh.' Kangwon flushed, unable to return the gaze, but still squeezing his hands.

"So don't let this eat away at you. Tell him. For your sake." He cupped his cheek.

UIP's gold hands were soft, unlike Kangwon's, and warm. He leaned into the touch, his eyes sliding to the other man's full lips. Then he felt weird about it and leaned away.

The Countryhuman didn't look disappointed. Kangwon had already told him he wouldn't be comfortable with more than that one kiss until he had told Korea and asked for his permission to be with him.

"I'll tell him," he said, relieved that his voice sounded more or less normal. "Before you visit again."

UIP smiled in relief. "Am I invited for the Lunar New Year?"

The province shook his head, climbing to his feet. "Korea has plans."

He didn't elaborate on them, since Korea hated people knowing what he was doing. He refused to allow other Countryhumans to come to Korea on non-official holidays (China was an exception), but he had apparently been coaxed to Beijing this year (though the exception wasn't really a reliable source for that; there was a chance Korea wasn't aware of his own plans yet).

UIP gave him a wry look. "Then we won't see each other until the next Victory Day."

Kangwon smiled easily. "Another half a year," he agreed, then sighed.

A sudden sky glint entered UIP's white eyes. "If you're so afraid, we could just... *not* tell him."

"Since that was Hebrew, I'll pretend I didn't hear it." Kangwon stood up, giving him a hand. "Especially since Korea would punish me for keeping secrets. And probably flay you alive."

"Haha, yes, good point." UIP looked briefly unnerved.

Palestine had been comrades with them for awhile, and believed the enemy narrative about them as much as he believed the narrative about his own freedom fighters, considering how similar

their histories were. But Korea had always despised Israel, being one of the few countries who was openly disdainful of him and refused to ever recognize his existence. Israel in return had hated them and spread America's lies about them to justify starving their people. The DPRK had the honour of being the sole member of the 'anti-semitic Axis of Evil' *not* in the Middle East, one of the few interesting titles they had gained over the years in their support of anti-Imperialists across the globe.

That meant Kangwon had spent a lot of time explaining that Korea *wasn't* going to beat UIP to death for being religious, or perform weird medical experiments on him, or throw Kangwon in a camp for being gay. He had been mostly successful.

Kangwon went to leave his room, since UIP would be returning to his republic now that the New Year was over, but stopped when he felt an almost shy tug on his sleeve.

He turned with a smile, slightly awkward as he met the embrace, still not used to properly hugging a man that wasn't one of his cousins or the Supreme Leader. The celebratory embraces he shared with their people on important days didn't count.

It felt good to bury his face in UIP's shoulder, and wrap his arms around him. Like something he wouldn't have missed if he'd never experienced it, but now that he had, never feeling it again would leave him aching.

He didn't want to let go, but he did, ending their private farewell to begin the more public one in the downstairs lobby.

When they got there, Korea was preoccupied with shoving a ceramic Mao mug into China's suitcase and reminding China to *'take it home, damn it.'* So he didn't see them come down together.

As he lectured SH for waking up so late after drinking so much last night, he also didn't see China slip the mug into Kangwon's hand to return to the kitchen for him. Or Kangwon chewing on his nails as UIP lingered on the doorstep.

"See you around," he said with his other cousins, smiling a smile

that felt nervous.

"Fi Amanillah," UIP returned formally, his eyebrows furrowing as Kangwon chewed on his nails.

The Korean watched him go, China slipping out behind him, ignoring the other Countryhuman completely, but giving the province a sly smile over his shoulder.

Kangwon never really knew what that meant. It could have been their comrade's way of signalling that he was onto him, or it could just be a China-look.

He caught Korea watching him and almost jumped. His Countryhuman was giving him a Korea-look, a narrow, suspicious squint. Kangwon hid his nails, trying to smile normally for him.

"Go clean up the guest rooms," was all his country said, striding away.

The other provinces left the lobby, those who knew that Korea's order had applied to them (SH, Sang, Hae), heading upstairs to clean, while those that had decided it hadn't (South Pyongan, Gyeonggi, Chungbuk) headed to the dining room for lunch.

Kangwon's smile faded as he was left alone, and he leaned back against the lobby counter, flopping his head down on the stone.

He knew Korea wouldn't punish him. He probably wouldn't even care. But...

The province sighed again, picking himself up to go clean as he had been told. And put away China's mug.

He would tell him. Soon.

One month later

"Kangwon."

Kangwon almost jumped off of his cushion, turning to face Korea. "Yes?"

His voice was a bit too high, and he could feel his cousins looking at him oddly from around the table.

Korea gave him an odd look as well as he stood poised to leave the dining room.

"I said I want the land surveys of the coast gone over by the end of this week," he said, his tone aggravated, making it clear he was repeating it. "I need to know which forests we can clear and where to plant the new trees."

"Yes, Comrade General, of course," he said, too fast. And it was strange to call him by his title at home like this.

Korea gave him another odd, wary look. "And stop biting your damn nails. You're supposed to be over that."

Kangwon quickly took them out of his mouth as his country left, followed by Y/N, mouthing 'Sorry' as she went, and most of his cousins, some of them (North Pyongan) giving him a sympathetic look, while others (South Chungcheong) gave him a disdainful glance.

Kangwon didn't feel too special about that. That was how she looked at everyone.

He quickly went to stand, too, needing to leave for Wonsan, but a voice stopped him.

"Kangwon, sit down."

He turned, trying not to look too tense. "Need something, SH?"

His cousin gave him a narrowed eyed look from where she had been sitting at Korea's right hand. "What's been going on with you?"

"Nothing," he said, too quickly again. "Why?"

"You've been eating your fingers, for one," South Pyongan pointed

out, coming back from the door, lured by escaping work for a second longer. "Haven't seen you do that since the war. The *first* one."

Kangwon hid his torn nails, all of which he'd gnawed down to the bloody quick. "I'm alright," he reassured them, making sure he spoke as slowly as he usually did. "I've just got a lot on my mind."

SH exchanged a look with Chagang, who had remained behind, sitting next to Hwang, buried in a book and probably not noticing that everyone had left.

"Look," she said, facing him again with a serious expression. "I'm only telling you this because I know you would never do anything to hurt Korea."

Kangwon sighed. "He's having me followed?"

She nodded. "Chagang and I have been watching you off and on since around seven months ago."

Chagang nodded.

"So whatever is 'on your mind,' Korea has noticed."

"Ha!" South Pyongan threw her fists in the air. "Kangwon broke the surveillance streak, not me. Let's go!"

North Chungcheong- who usually stayed put until his sister was safely out of the building and away from him- raised his eyebrows. "Does Korea seriously make you guys stalk each other?"

"Ayuh!" Hae said cheerily from between him and Kangwon.

Korea could be... suspicious. Kangwon had been tapped to follow a few of his cousins around before, when their Countryhuman's paranoia was getting the better of him. Once he'd had to follow South Pyongan up and down Paektusan because she'd noticed him tailing her. On foot.

It didn't happen often, which was a relief, and he only ever got them to watch each other, since it wouldn't be good for any of their

agents to think there was any reason to distrust their Provincehumans.

'Good. If you haven't seen them, then our comrades are doing their jobs well,' Korea liked to say. After much debate and testing, the provinces had come to the conclusion that was one of his rare jokes.

South Pyongan raised a brow at Chungbuk. "You haven't noticed? He only stopped having you comrades followed last year."

The Southern provinces *did* get human agents, since holdouts of reactionary behaviour were obviously a concern for them, and it was good for their operatives to know that no leftover from the other half of their country made him overly trusting of them.

"Wow," their Southern cousin said, impressed. "No, haven't seen a thing. Your guys are *way* better than the NIS."

"I t-think we're just not used to their methods," Gangwon timidly suggested from Kangwon's right.

Chungbuk nodded sagely. "That's right. Save us face."

"The only reason Korea hasn't said anything is because Chagang and I have reported that your movements are clean," SH cut in, still focused on Kangwon. "But you've still been acting weird."

"You know," he said. "For someone who hates people prying into your business, you're pretty nosy yourself."

The white-skinned Provincehuman huffed. "I'm not 'prying.' I'm asking if you're okay and not taking 'I'm fine' for an answer again. For someone who's always trying to get us to talk about our feelings, *you* are acting a lot like Korea, lately."

"Jumpiness included," South Pyongan chimed in.

"Korea ain't jumpy," Hae complained petulantly.

"Kangwon, please." SH leaned towards him with eyes full of genuine concern. "The others can leave, if you want-"

"Not me," South Pyongan protested.

"-but at least tell *me* what's wrong. I'm worried."

"We all are," Hwang said, briefly glancing up.

Hae nodded vigorously, glomping onto his arm. "You wore gloves to the meetin' last week. That means you're upset."

SH reached a hand along the table, though she was too far to reach him. *"Please* Kang. If you try to walk away, I'll have Chagang restrain you."

Chagang nodded.

Kangwon should have known the others would have noticed. The Southerners might accept his 'fines,' but his Northern cousins could read his silent facial language as easily as they spoke it.

And of course Korea had realized almost immediately, though he'd never asked if he was alright.

He opened his mouth to say it was nothing, really, but made himself stop. It *was* pretty hypocritical to be silent on his own problems, when he wanted the others to be open for their own health.

Kangwon took a deep breath, not letting himself think too much as he spread his hands on the table.

"I'm gay."

He had never had a problem with his sexuality, even back in the early 1900's when he'd been formed. He didn't have a choice in it, so there was no point in feeling disgusted or ashamed of it. And he had never imagined telling anyone, so he never expected to face any prejudice from it.

But he knew not everyone felt that way. As he waited for his cousins' reactions, his fingers found their way to his mouth, anxiety twisting in his stomach. If he lost one of them...

South Hamgyong and South Pyongan exchanged glances, then looked back to him.

"I think we knew that," SH said.

"Yeah, obviously," South Pyongan added.

Kangwon blinked, dumbstruck. "What?"

He wasn't exactly effeminate. He didn't think he really had any behaviours that were stereotypical of gay men.

Hwang had put down his book, marking the page with a finger. "I would not go so far as to say it was 'obvious,' but you and SH were both quite obsessed with the same actor for awhile."

"Comrade Ri Yong-ho," they both said in sync, before SH coughed lightly and Kangwon flushed.

He still had the workbook he'd asked the actor to sign. It was in his desk.

"Was it really that noticeable?" he asked, embarrassed. Hopefully Korea hadn't realized.

Or maybe hopefully he had. If it was one of those things they both knew, but just didn't talk about, then he would never have to tell him.

"Yeah." South Pyongan leaned back on her hands, smirking. *'"Hong Kil-dong's'* a good movie, but there's really only one reason you'd watch it once a week for three months straight."

"Ah love that movie!" Hae chirped. "What's 'gay' mean? It sounds like a loanword. You know Korea doesn't like loanwords."

"It means Kangwon likes men," Hwang clarified.

"Ooohhhhhh," Hae said, then frowned.

"If it makes you feel better, I never would have guessed," Chungbuk said, leaning around Hae to clap him on the shoulder.

"Hwang? North Pyongan? Maybe. You? No way."

"My brother *is* a delicate flower," South Pyongan said fondly.

"Stereotypes benefit no one," Hwang sniffed, returned to his book.

Kangwon turned slightly to his brother, searching his face for his reaction.

It was saddening that they could no longer read each other. The Southern provinces still used their silent language, but much like their real language, over the years the dialects had morphed and changed, until something that should have been as familiar as their own blood had become almost foreign. Another effect of the Division that would never truly go away.

But the look of relief that went across Gangwon's thin green face didn't need any reading.

"I always wondered," he said, fiddling with his hearing aid. "I remember being like t-that, and I remember it stopping. B-But I didn't know if it was just me."

"Just you," Kangwon confirmed, the small bit of nail he had left cracking under his teeth.

Hwang's head whipped up. "You no longer feel attraction to men after being divided? Do you feel any attraction to anyone at all?"

"N-N-No," Gangwon stuttered, flinching under the attention. Shamefully, he admitted, "N-None."

Hwang looked ecstatic now. "Sexuality can change with provincial divisions? That is *fascinating!* You know I don't think any studies have ever been done on that. I've never read anything, anyways. I suppose because it would be fairly taboo in most places. We could be the first in the field! Kangwon, Gangwon, could I study you later?"

Kangwon blinked at his cousin slowly, and he coughed, adjusting his glasses.

"Ah, I mean, could I ask you some topical questions? *If* you would be comfortable answering."

"You're on thin ice, Hwang," SH warned.

"Yes, of course, forgive me." Meekly, he hid his face in his book again.

"It doesn't... bother any of you?" Kangwon ventured, another bit of nail snapping.

"Of course not," SH said, smiling. "And there's no reason it should." Her eyes narrowed and her smile became sharp as she strafed the rest of their cousins. "Right?"

"Right," Chagang confirmed, sipping his tea.

"'Course," South Pyongan said. "I mean, I think it's *weird,* but I think people who don't eat meat are weird, too. Doesn't affect me, though, so who cares."

Gangwon quickly shook his head. "N-No. It would k-kind of be hypocritical if I did, since I was, too. W-We were?"

"No problems here," Chungbuk confirmed. "I'm Mister Comrade Progressive."

Hwang's eyes lit up like they did when he was getting ready to explain something. "Homosexuality is actually perfectly natural. There are plenty of occurrences of it in the animal kingdom. For example, did you know that bonnet macaques-"

"North Hwanghae," SH cut him off warningly.

"Ahem, yes, sorry. No issues present."

Kangwon let out a half-amused, half-relieved chuckle. He hadn't expected sensitivity from them, since expecting something you knew you wouldn't get would just leave you let down. He hadn't wanted it, either. Any reaction that wasn't complete disownment was fine by him.

"Do you think... any of the others would... think less of me?" he asked, biting his nails again.

He had good reads on all his cousins, the Northern ones at least. Over a hundred years was enough to know someone almost as well as you knew yourself. But even after all those years, they'd never talked about anything like that, so he couldn't be sure.

And even if he was, he just... wanted to hear it from his cousins that the rest of their family wouldn't hate him.

South Pyongan waved a hand. "You know North Pyongan. Even when he was in his whole 'god-phase,' he was the world's most reasonable Christian. And I raised him better than that."

"North Pyongan knew homosexuals," Chagang said in his deep voice.

They all looked at him. He blinked slowly.

"What?" Chungbuk asked.

"He knew homosexuals," the navy-skinned man repeated in the same cadence.

Knowing that was all the answer they would get, SH moved on. "I've never talked with Ryanggang about those things, obviously, but I think it would be strange if he did have an issue. I mean, he's so... laidback."

"Not... quite the word for it," Kangwon said tentatively. 'Laidback' implied a kind of intended calmness. Ryanggang was just exhausted all the time.

"Maybe not. But I don't think he would care. You know he's got a kind heart." SH made a face. "Maybe hold off on telling North Hamgyong, though. Or bring someone when you do."

"Bring me," South Pyongan volunteered, pounding her palm with her fist. "If he says anything, I'll put him on his ass."

Even if North Hamgyong had a problem with it, Kangwon

doubted he would say or do much. Korea had drilled living harmoniously into their heads hard enough to strike oil. Though it would still hurt if his cousin no longer wanted to go drinking with him, or hit the trails on Chilbosan.

One of Kangwon's hangnails peeled away, deep enough to draw blood. He subtly spit the little piece of skin out.

"I don't think you'll have any problems from us," Chungbuk volunteered. "We've kind of talked about crap like that before. Sang might tell you she'll pray for you or something, and South Chungcheong is *definitely* homophobic. Guarantee if she hears, she'll call you a slur and say you disgust her."

"So her average behaviour," SH confirmed.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Pretty much."

South Pyongan grinned. "Then I finally get to beat her up!"

"It's alright," Kangwon assured her. "I can handle it."

Like SH and Chungbuk had said, it would be stranger if South Chungcheong *didn't* insult him. Korea had picked up his valiant attempt to instill her with Socialist values right where he'd left off, but it was safer for your ego to not be alone with the lavender-skinned woman for too long. Knowing Kangwon liked men would only make her *more* disgusted in him.

And though it felt shameful to admit... The idea of the Southern provinces hating him for his sexuality didn't worry him as much. It would pinch, sure. But it wouldn't crush him like it would if one of his Northern cousins did.

Even after four years, the differences between them ran deep. Once they had all been Communists. Now most of the Southerners 'didn't care' about politics, and had to be re-educated.

They once shared similar work ethics. Now the Southerners thought the Northerners were lazy for only having eight hour work days, even when they did other work outside of it. They were still stuck in the belief that two tasks finished over twelve hours was

working harder than four finished in eight. And Kangwon knew the laidback attitudes the provinces from below the Parallel had towards their own governmental work irritated a few of those above. Korea hadn't even let them take up official posts yet, relegating the work in their lands to Kangwon and the others.

At the same time, the Southerners believed the Northerners were too strict, maintaining schedules, reinforcing the keeping of state secrets, and doing things they hadn't been assigned. When South Pyongan had told Gyeonggi that they couldn't play football until she was done planning out the new urban district in Pyongsong, he had called her a buzzkill, and Kangwon had got to see someone speedrun an identity crisis.

They were unused to being trusted with tasks from up high, and it showed, giving them lackadaisical and bureaucratic attitudes in their workstyle, especially since most of them hadn't held proper jobs before.

North Chungcheong actually had a human girlfriend, something that displeased SH greatly, though Kangwon didn't think their cousin had noticed. It was a little different for them, considering they had been more celebrities than political figures, and the two *did* seem to love each other. But he couldn't say that he was a fan of it, either.

They even walked differently. Kangwon had always thought he had a pretty relaxed gait. He'd never realized how much he *marched* until Gangwon was struggling to keep up with him, his brother's pace casual and loose compared to his. The Southern Provincehumans moved like civilians. The Northern Provincehumans moved like soldiers.

And there were those words, too. 'Northern' and 'Southern.' They were Reunified. It was just Korea again.

Yet Kangwon would find himself referring to them that way in his head. North Chungcheong had just called himself and the Southerners 'us.' And still one of the first things a Korean would ask another they were getting to know was 'Where are you from?' And instead of the answer being 'Kangwon,' or 'Gyeonggi,' or 'Jeju' it was

either 'the North' or 'the South.'

He knew it hurt Korea to see that the wounds from the Division remained, and that they hadn't magically melted away. That was why they needed to correct their thinking. There was no Northern or Southern anymore- there was only Korean.

But he couldn't change how he felt without time. And so long as his Northern cousins accepted him for who he was, he would be fine.

'And Korea.'

"Hey, Hae." Chungbuk poked her. "You've been pretty quiet. Don't tell me you're the one we have to watch out for."

Kangwon turned to her, realizing that she hadn't responded yet. Her small white brows were furrowed as she was deep in thought.

He felt a prickle of nerves and chewed on his nails again. Hae was pretty open-minded, but also a little naïve when it came to stuff like that. His other cousins at least knew enough about same-sex relationships to know they existed, but she'd never been exposed to the idea before.

If the strangeness of the idea bothered her, or worse, grossed her out... If his littlest cousin looked at him with anything like that, he would return to the woods and live life like a hermit again.

"Kang... likes men?" she asked eventually, still frowning.

"Yeah," he agreed, mouth dry.

The short woman looked around the table at everyone staring expectantly, her eyes narrowed like they were playing a trick on her.

"...We're *supposed* to like men," she said, her bubbly voice suspicious. "We're supposed'ta like *all* our people."

Kangwon sighed as the tension drained from him, and SH and Chungbuk started to giggle.

South Pyongan snorted in amusement. "Literally never change, Hae."

She pouted. "You know ah don't like it when you laugh at me. It's not my fault ah don't know what you're talkin' about."

"No, it's not," Hwang assured her, leaning around Chungbuk to pat her hand. "Stockpile your questions until we're done, then I'll answer any you have."

Hae brightened. "Okay!" she chirped, snuggling back up to Kangwon, squeaking happily as he squeezed her with an arm.

'Thank the General.' His heart was thumping in his chest, and he was shaking slightly. If waiting for Hae's answer had made him like this, he might not have to worry about telling Korea- a heart attack would kill him before he could.

"Okay, okay," South Pyongan said, propping her elbow on the table. "You're gay, cool. Why are you telling us this? Like did you just realize, orrrrr...?"

Kangwon inhaled, sobering.

"I want to tell Korea."

He didn't miss the looks they shot each other.

South Pyongan's pursed lips and raised brows said *'Oooo,'* while SH's slight grimace said, *'Eeee.'* Hwang's face was also skeptical.

Chagang remained expressionless.

SH caught Kangwon's wince and quickly pasted a smile back on her face. "Okay! But why?"

"Yeah, if I were you I probably just keep it zipped," South Pyongan advised. "Like if it was really stressing you that bad, tell us your truth or whatever. But Korea? *Ehhhhh."*

"Inadvisable," Hwang agreed.

"Korea needs to know everything," Hae protested.

"Hae, this is one of those matters that are better for Korea *not* to know," her brother told her.

"Hmmm." Hae's eyes squinted as she shifted into spy-cam mode. At the end of the meeting, she would decide whether or not the footage should be handed over to Korea or deleted. It didn't worry Kangwon, since he knew if she thought it would make Korea mad at him, she would choose the second option.

"Ahem," SH cleared her throat, giving them all pointed glances. "Kangwon, I get that you feel like you should tell Korea this, but I think it might cause unnecessary friction."

"Hey, wait," Chungbuk protested. "It's kind of already causing him friction, isn't it?" He snatched one of Kangwon's hands from his lap, showing them the mangled nails. "The whole reason we're having this conversation is because he's been tweaking and Korea thinks he's turning traitor. Clearly hiding it isn't good for him."

'Tweakin',' Hae mouthed in confusion. Kangwon couldn't help her with that one.

"He's not having issues because he's hiding it," SH corrected. "He's having issues *because* he wants to tell Korea."

Kangwon nodded shamefully. "It wouldn't bother me if I never told him, or any of you comrades."

"Okay, then why do you want to?" South Pyongan asked. "Stop wanting to tell him, no more leaving blood on the tableware. Unless you want to ask his permission to date a dude or something."

She said it as a joke, but as Kangwon didn't respond, sinking down into his shoulders, she shot up, slamming a palm on the table.

"No fucking way! Who?!"

Kangwon fidgeted, torn between telling them or turning around and saying this was all a joke. He had to make up his mind soon because SH was giving him a narrow-eyed look that clearly said he

was shifting into the 'just another man' category with Chungbuk.

"Is it UIP?"

Kangwon almost jolted at the words, his wide eyes flicking to who had spoken.

Chagang stared back at him. "Is it?"

"I..." He cleared his throat, looking at his hands under the table. "Yeah. It is."

"UIP?!" Hae gasped, then blinked rapidly. "What about him?"

"Oh no *way!"* South Pyongan said, equal parts disbelieving and ecstatic. "You're not only gay, you want to date *UIP?* Korea's going to have an aneurysm. Can I be there if you do tell him? He's going to spit *blood."*

Kangwon flinched, and SH smacked South Pyongan's jacketed shoulder.

"Be polite," she scolded, defending Kangwon now that she knew he wasn't pursuing one of their people.

"I think she might be right," Chungbuk said apologetically.

"I almost guarantee she is." Hwang pushed his glasses up, book fully set aside now, his page not even marked. "Kangwon, I do hope you understand the ramifications of this. SH and I would have to work strenuously simply to justify you dating a man to our populace. We could go with the progressive route and market you as an inspiration to any of our people who also experience same-sex attraction, but your image would still take a hit."

"'Market' is a word we use for products, Hwang," SH said lightly. "Not people."

"Quite so," he quickly agreed. "But regardless, if enough people decided it was degenerate behavior, Korea might have to go so far as to strip you of your titles for a time, and make a show of re-educating you."

Kangwon hung his head. "I know."

"But courting a foreign Countryhuman would completely shatter even any base of support I could find in your fellow homosexuals," his cousin went on, his hands clasped professionally. "Especially considering the displeasure at our joining the Soviet Union. UIP being another Soviet Republic only worsens our position, since it would be seen as enmeshing ourselves even further with CCCP."

"I know," Kangwon sighed miserably. He did. He had considered all of this.

"Wow," Chungbuk said into the gloomy pause. *"Really* feeling the loving support here, guys."

Hwang looked affronted. "Of course we'll support him if he chooses to go down this path. But it would be foolish not to anticipate the challenges."

"It would be," Kangwon agreed heavily. "And if you think it would cause too much instability, I'll give up."

Gangwon blinked rapidly at that. "B-But..."

"My personal life isn't as important as our country," Kangwon said firmly. "Nothing comes before the well-being of the Republic."

"You're all going to have to start remembering how to live like that," SH advised, her sharp eyes flicking between the Sou- between Chungbuk and Gangwon.

They both dipped their heads in acknowledgement. They had been two of the only real Communists left among their half. Them and Jeju.

"I'd keep it quiet," Kangwon said to Hwang. "I wouldn't go parading around or anything."

His cousin nodded thoughtfully. "So long as you're as careful as you usually are with more secretive tasks, I believe you could successfully keep it hidden, if you truly wish."

"I do," Kangwon said, putting his hand up as a divider so he couldn't see South Pyongan wiggling her eyebrows at him.

"Very well," his cousin sighed, adjusting his glasses again. "Then SH and I will start preparing for any possible future fallout."

"If I can help in any way, I will," Kangwon promised. "I don't want to make extra work for you."

"So you *are* going to tell Korea?" South Pyongan asked skeptically. "Seriously?"

"Maybe," he said uncomfortably. "I guess we're just talking hypotheticals right now."

"You're all squirmy," Hae noted, muffled by his arm. "It's weird."

The russet-skinned province sighed. He hadn't been so nervous in... decades. In times of crisis, like the Anti-Imperialist World War, he was calm, and he pretty much never had personal issues.

Yet here he was, squirming around, flushing in embarrassment, and turning his fingers into biohazards.

He worked up the courage to ask, "So what do you think Korea thinks of... people like me?" dreading the answer.

"Wait, you don't know?" Chungbuk asked in surprise.

"We've never had a reason to talk about it," SH said defensively. "Matters like that are private."

"And Korea's different now, too," Kangwon pointed out. "Even if we knew before, we don't know how South felt about it, or how it would affect him."

He didn't think it would much. Korea wasn't so different than he had been before the Reunification.

But if it was even a little...

"Korrrr- South! didn't have any strong feelings about gays,"

Chungbuk volunteered. "I mean, SJ's actually lesbian, and he never sent her to conversion therapy or anything."

Kangwon and the others raised their brows, and Gangwon whispered, "I think you just out-ted her."

Chungbuk's face fell. "Oh. Shit. Don't tell her I told you that."

"I wonder if Jeju also prefers women then?" Hwang mused. "Or if she lost any attraction at all, as Gangwon did."

"But... he knew?" Kangwon asked, not yet decided if that should make him hopeful (but glad that Hwang had someone else to 'study').

Their cousin nodded, moving on from his blunder easily. "She got caught with a girlfriend by some sasaeng, and it was a whole thing. South had to pay off some people to say that anyone spreading rumours in tabloids or online was working for Norrrr- Korea! trying to incite chaos."

"Of course," SH said dryly. "But that could be good news. If it was well-known enough that it was in tabloids, then Korea probably heard."

Kangwon nodded. He'd always denied it, but they knew their Countryhuman kept as close of tabs as possible on the provinces below the Parallel. There was a chance he knew of SJ's scandal.

Though that didn't mean much for him.

"So if both of them were aware, then Korea likely is," Hwang hypothesized. "I believe he's recovered most of his memories by now."

If UIP had, then their Countryhuman probably had, too. Not that he would tell them that. Especially not if he'd recovered South's. Kangwon had tried to get him to open up about his Reunification difficulties, but he'd had no success so far. And he knew if he pushed too hard, Korea would stop sharing even small details.

"Well, that's good," Chungbuk said coachingly, nudging Kangwon's

shoulder. "He hasn't made SJ kneel on rice or told her she's going to hell."

"Korea wouldn't do that," SH, Kangwon, and Hae said in sync.

"Definitely wouldn't," South Pyongan agreed. "If he's never made *me* do it, he wouldn't make anyone else. But he hasn't sent her to Ryanggang's farm, either. That's the real good sign."

"He wouldn't punish us for it," Kangwon explained, picking at his hangnails. "He'd actually punish South Chungcheong if he ever heard her call us slurs."

Hae nodded happily. "Ah still don't know what you're talkin' about, but the Constitution says we need to get along. If Chungnam keeps bein' mean, Korea's goin' to put her to work."

"Anti-social behaviour is far worse than homosexuality," SH gravely agreed.

Chungbuk blinked slowly, flicking his eyes around at them, obviously wondering something.

"So, the facts we have." SH primly folded her hands. "South is 'weird' about homosexuality. But never mistreated SJ for it?"

"Nope," Chungbuk confirmed, still frowning at Kangwon. "And he wasn't against doing those weird, homoerotic photoshoots with other male idols. Y'know, the ones they do to excite female fans?"

"Don't know, don't want to know," SH confidently replied. "Anyways! Korea. What do we have?"

"He was and is against any behaviors that upset collective society." Hwang polished his glasses on his tie. "I'm certain he shares the prevalent view that most Western homosexuals are individualistic degenerates."

"Kangwon's good on that then," South Pyongan said cheerily. "No more degenerate than the rest of us."

"Thanks," Kangwon said.

"No problem."

"That's how he feels about behaviours, not people," SH said thoughtfully, then exclaimed, "Oh! Comrade Kim Yong-hwan!"

Chungbuk looked around. "That old bat's still alive? Tell her to come out and make my sister run for her money again."

"She's still dead," SH said regretfully before brightening again. "But she preferred women!"

Gangwon blinked in shock. "Wait, r-really?"

"Knew it." South Pyongan was smug.

Kangwon nodded, having known that, too. "After the war, she lived with Comrade An Il-rae. She adopted a few orphans that they raised together, too. And neither of them ever got married."

He'd gone drinking with them after hospital work several times over the years, and could confidently say that they had been together, though neither had ever said it out loud.

SH was bobbing her head. "She was a war hero- Korea always used to visit them. He had to know they were together!"

"Okay, don't want to shut you down," South Pyongan began. "But let's remember that we're talking about *Korea* here. Comrade Ri Beng-jeong, anyone?"

Chungbuk and Gangwon looked confused, but SH kissed her teeth in disappointment. Kangwon gave an amused huff.

"He went on three dates with her before he realized that's what they were," he reminisced.

And Korea *hadn't* been the one to realize. Kangwon had heard that he was being invited to her house to 'go over some architectural plans' (conveniently at a time when her relatives were away) and had stepped in before the misunderstanding could go any further. His Countryhuman had been mortified.

"Yeah." South Pyongan nodded. "And he didn't see Y/N making moony eyes at him for like, a month. Let's not give him credit by saying he knew Comrade Kim Yong-hwan was gay when he can't even tell when people are normal. Sorry," she added when SH cleared her throat.

Kangwon let out a despairing breath. It was true. Korea had never seemed to pick up on it when women were interested in him. For awhile, he'd actually thought...

Well, it didn't matter. Y/N had proved that wrong.

But if Korea didn't realize when women liked men, he probably wouldn't have realized that Kim Yong-hwan and her 'housemate' had been together, so it wouldn't have influenced what he thought of her. And that crossed out a few other comrades in the Worker's Party and other occupations that they knew, too. How he treated them couldn't reflect on Kangwon.

"It's different for our people, too," he admitted, trying to chew on a nail before Hae snatched his hand. "As long as they're not reactionaries, Korea respects them. There's nothing they could do to turn him against them."

Korea tolerated far more from their people than he did from others. Attitudes that he wanted corrected in his Provincehumans went unmentioned in civilians. And he didn't grimace in irritation when one of them was too loud or too crass, or when students asked him overly invasive questions.

SH was undeterred. "There has to be something that could give us a hint to what he thinks."

"Him, maybe?" Chungbuk suggested.

"Something," SH repeated, tapping her chin as she ignored him.

"Ah." Hwang brightened. "Kangwon, refresh my memory. Doesn't the constitution for the Family Planning and Maternal and Child Health Association mention sexuality?"

Kangwon lifted his head, momentarily hopeful. "It does. It says it

can't discriminate based on sexual orientation."

South Pyongan raised her hand. "Being a downer again, but that doesn't exactly mean Korea supports it himself. He didn't like some of the market reforms we enacted, and he wasn't always a fan of..." She pursed her lips, looking away like she was embarrassed. "Meh. Point is, if it's good for our people, it happens. Doesn't mean he supports it."

"But that means he *does* think it's good for our people," SH challenged.

"It means he thinks social cohesion and not allowing discrimination are good for our people," Hwang countered.

"Hey, tell me if I'm crazy here-" Chungbuk loudly cut in. "But you could just *ask him.* Doesn't even have to be Kangwon. I could just go up to him and say 'Hey, Korea, what do you think about the gays?'"

"That wouldn't work," SH said decisively. "Even if you don't remember how he is, you should have relearned by now. If you ask him something like that, he'll get suspicious and ask why, and he'll refuse to answer until you tell him. And you can't afford to be caught lying right now."

Chungbuk blew out a puff of air. "Right. Yeah."

"We could ask China," South Pyongan suggested. When they all looked at her, baffled, she explained, "They talk policy for fun, right? It might have come up."

"Mm." SH crossed her arms over her chest. "China will know we're asking for one of us. It's never good to give him inside information."

Kangwon thought China might already know about him. Besides the knowing looks, he'd made several comments before that could be interpreted that way, though they stopped just short of insults.

They threw around a few more names of people that they either knew or suspected of being attracted to the same sex that Korea had met, brought up a few more clauses in their social contracts, written and unwritten, a few past incidents of people getting sentenced for

degenerate behaviours, and briefly mentioned Korea's acceptance of Mongolia's lack of gender.

But the first two points only brought up the same arguements; the core of the degenerate behaviors hadn't even been the criminals' homosexuality, but other objectively unsavory details; and Mongolia was a foreign Countryhuman- Korea was always polite to potential allies. It was only once they spent too much time around him that he started showing his real personality and how he actually felt about them, like with China and Russia.

"Sorry, Kangwon," SH eventually apologized. "We just don't have enough information."

South Pyongan snapped her fingers. "Curse our lack of communication! But not really."

"It's alright." Kangwon smiled ruefully. "I didn't really expect we'd suddenly remember something he said. But knowing what little we do know..." He took in a breath. "Do I tell him?"

SH pursed her lips in thought, looking around at their cousins, who avoided her eyes.

"We should have a vote!" she suggested with faux cheer when no one responded.

"We don't have everyone," Hae pointed out, aggressively cuddling into Kangwon.

Kangwon put his arm around her. "I'd rather less people knew anyways. Just in case."

His little cousin pushed her lower lip out. "Ah still don't get it."

"I'll talk to you after Hwang does," he promised. And make sure that his cousin hadn't just rambled on about animal facts.

"So!" SH clapped her hands together. "Who thinks Kangwon should tell Korea he likes men?"

Intense silence fell over the table as almost everyone suddenly

found the gold-patterned walls and dark floorboards incredibly interesting.

Kangwon's spirits sank, though their reaction wasn't unexpected. In their place, he'd probably be examining the tea heater, too.

Chungbuk looked side-to-side incredulously, then raised his hand.

"Okay, I'm choosing to believe everything you said earlier. The propaganda's fake, being gay isn't illegal, you're not going to get sent to a camp for it, and you think that even if Korea's a homophobe, he's not going to do anything to you about it."

They all nodded, except Hae, who whispered "Hyeomophope" in confusion under her breath. Kangwon doubted the rest of them knew what the word meant, either (besides Hwang), and were only guessing by context clues. He'd only heard it from UIP, after all.

The violet-skinned man searched their faces, waiting for them to say what he was thinking.

No one did, so he said out loud, "Then what are you so scared of? If punishment's off the menu, then the worst he can say is he thinks it's strange or something."

Kangwon looked to SH, whose lips pressed thin. South Pyongan and Hwang met their eyes. Even Hae looked sober, not quite understanding the full context, but knowing they were talking about something that could make Korea upset at her cousin.

The Southerners didn't get it. They had never been as close to South as the Northerners were to their Korea. And while they had once known that Korea, too, had been freed from Japan by him, fought with him, laughed and lived with him for twenty-six years, and danced in the streets with tears running down their faces with him and their people when they had finally Liberated themselves... That had been decades ago.

They hadn't been there for most of the war. They hadn't been rescued from the POW camp by Korea as he risked himself

personally for them, or for losing Seoul the second time, and the darkness that had brought their Countryhuman. They hadn't been there for the plagues that wracked the country, or for the bombings that burnt whole villages to ash and piled their murdered people around them by the millions. Or for when Korea had finally broken down and the provinces had stood in the ruins of their country and vowed to never waver from their path, or show any weakness again.

The Southerners hadn't been there to carry that promise into the future, through rebuilding and sabotage attempts and prosperity and the second Arduous March. They hadn't sat at the table while Korea snarled at them to finish their meals even as his own place sat empty. They didn't know what it was like to feel the noose closing slowly around their necks, the only thing keeping them breathing being Korea's fingers dug desperately into the rope as they rallied behind him and clawed their way out of the dark pit of famine. Or how it felt to know that if they stopped to breathe for just a second, if they got too careless or one little thing that they had no control over changed in the world around them, they could go tumbling back in.

Crisis-bonding was a powerful force. And Korea and the Northern provinces had been in crisis mode together for over a century. Because even when their country wasn't, in order to keep it that way, *they* were.

And Kangwon was self-aware enough to realize that he especially was sensitive when it came to Korea. His sense of self-worth and happiness were so deeply tangled up with his Countryhuman's perception of him that even if he'd wanted to fix that, he wouldn't know where to begin.

Even just hearing that Korea had suspected him enough to have him followed for the first time ever outside of the Arduous March (which had been about Korea's mindset, not Kangwon's actions) had made his chest grow tight.

He was the one that had taken Korea home and put him back together, who'd fed him painstakingly mashed meat and vegetables and cleaned the wounds Japan had carved into him. He was the first province to join his fight, to set off into the future with nothing

and no one else, only the faith that he had for his Countryhuman, and the faith his country had placed in him. He was the only person Korea trusted to do his check-ups, to make sure he took his iron pills, and to give him IVs when his eating disorder started to take its toll on him. Because Kangwon would do it all silently and never push, or call it what it was to his face. He wouldn't even speak.

He was the one Korea kept in the room when he knew he was going to pass out. And even though it hadn't been that bad in decades and likely, hopefully never would be again, the idea that if it ever was, Kangwon would be sent away, too, leaving Korea alone because he'd rather be that way than be treated by Kangwon...

He had never been a crier, but it made his hands shaky and the backs of his eyes burn.

It didn't matter that Korea wouldn't punish him. If Kangwon told him he liked men, and he looked at him with disgust or disdain for even a *second,* even if he came around eventually, even if he came around the second after, it would always leave a mark. For a moment, Kangwon wouldn't have been his province or his family, but something else, other. Foreign.

If Kangwon knew he would look at him that way, he would never tell him. He would shove it deep inside of himself and padlock it shut forever. As much as he liked UIP, he would never speak to him again. He wouldn't even *look* at any other men again, if he could help it.

Because *nothing* was more important than Korea.

But he couldn't know if it disgusted him. Not until he told him. And by that point it would be too late. He couldn't take it back and they could never go back to how they were.

North Chungcheong was right. The worst Korea could say was that it was strange. That the man that had stood at his left side for over a century was suddenly strange to him.

"H-Hyung."

Kangwon flinched as someone grabbed his wrist, gently tugging his hand away from his mouth. He tasted iron and realized that he'd torn a nerve under his nail, and blood was trickling down his finger.

Gangwon smiled at him with nervous sympathy. His brother understood at least a little more than Chungbuk. They'd both been Kangwon after all.

"If the rest of you think he wouldn't approve, I won't tell him," Kangwon said quietly, hiding his stinging fingertips.

SH nodded, smiling sadly. "I promise I'll make sure no one else does."

"Come on, man. Comrade." But Chungbuk didn't urge any more than that, sensing that he was being left out of something.

Kangwon drew his knees up to his chest, sighing as he traced a finger over the pale scar that curved around his left thumb, the one all the Northern provinces shared.

His heart ached like a woodpecker was searching it for bugs. It hurt that while he would do anything for Korea, no matter what, and always had, there was a possibility that something intrinsic about who he was would sever Korea returning that feeling.

He would have to hide it. And it *would* be hiding now, since some of his cousins knew. And he'd have to be worried about North Chungcheong accidentally revealing it. It would only infuriate Korea more if he heard it from someone other than him. He'd have to think of some way to tell UIP, and apologize for leading him on. It wouldn't be healthy for himself, but...

Kangwon just couldn't risk it. If Korea was disgusted by him, lost trust in him, became uncomfortable around him...

He thought he might actually die.

His cousins' silence was guilty now, though they knew it was the right decision. SH looked up from under her lashes at him, twisting the corner of her lips in apology. He twisted the other corner of his.

'I'm sorry, Kang.'

'It's alright. It's for the best.'

Kangwon put his hands on the table, prepared to stand and throw himself back into work to try and forget about this.

"You should tell him."

He looked up, blinking in surprise. It was Chagang again.

"What?"

"You should tell him," he repeated bluntly.

"Look out, Kangwon- Chagang wants to be the new Supreme Minister of Forestry," South Pyongan joked.

Chagang ignored her, remaining focused on Kangwon, his gaze steady. "You said there is nothing our people could do to turn him against them. It's the same for us. So long as you remain a revolutionary, Korea will not turn on you."

Kangwon bit his lip, unused to being the one seeking comfort. "But..."

"Korea's view of our people can't be degraded because he loves them," Chagang said without inflection. "He loves us, too."

Kangwon's breath hitched at the words. SH swiftly looked at her hands, cheeks red, Hwang removed his glasses to vigorously clean them, and South Pyongan turned her entire body away from the table, hiding her face.

It was something that they all knew in their cores. Korea loved them. He would do almost anything for them. If it weren't for his responsibilities to their country, he *would* do anything. Every bowl of rice, even as he starved, every offer to finish their paperwork for them, every vital task entrusted to them was his way of saying it.

But he never said it aloud. So hearing it now, even from Chagang, made Kangwon's heart swell.

"Ayuh," Hae agreed cheerfully. "Korea loves us!"

North Chungcheong gave a small smile at that, looking across the table to Gangwon, who cast his eyes down. For a moment, their silent dialect became intelligible, and Kangwon reached out to touch his brother's hand.

He smiled back at him, bittersweet.

"He will accept you no matter what," Chagang finished.

There was a small, stunned silence.

"Wow," Chungbuk said finally. "I think that's *literally* the most I've ever heard you speak."

Chagang nodded. "Yes."

SH shook her head like she was clearing cobwebs away. "Chagang's right. No matter what Korea says about you liking UIP, he'll at least accept that you like men. It doesn't change anything about you. You should tell him."

"I concur," Hwang said, sounding ashamed. "It was foolish for me to overlook the biggest factor in the decision."

"Yeah, sure, go for it." South Pyongan shrugged. "Still think he'll call you a degenerate, but hey- nothing out of the usual."

"Votin' uninformed is what reactionaries do," Hae proudly announced. "So ah'm abstainin'. But if we're votin' for if Korea loves us or not, ah'll vote 'ayuh' every time."

Kangwon looked to his brother, who hesitated, then nodded.

"T-Tell him, Kang," he said, biting one of his own nails. "You should."

Hope and terror both filled his chest, making it hard to speak. Hope that they were right, and Korea's love for him would overcome anything he might see as a failing.

And terror because now he had to tell Korea. And they might be wrong.

He swallowed with an effort. "I'll tell him."

"Good." Chungbuk gave him a thump. "If he acts like an old man about it, just give him time. Your half always has been pretty progressive."

They had. *He* had. Hopefully it would extend to this.

"I'll tell him once I get back from going over the land surveys," Kangwon said, chewing on a hangnail.

"Good luck." Hwang stood, patting him on the shoulder as he passed. "And thank you for telling us. Hae, do you want your questions answered now?"

"Ayuh!" She shot to his side, then darted back to Kangwon, leaning down to hug his head. "Love you, Kang! Stop chewin' on your nails!"

"I love you, too, Hae," he said, smiling up at her, one eye being crushed by her arm. "And I'll try."

She slipped up to Hwang, latching onto his arm as he walked her to the door.

"North Hwanghae," SH called, her voice filled with menace. "If I hear *one word* about bonnet macaques-"

"I assure you that you won't," he said quickly, then scurried away with his sister, who was already rattling off questions, mostly about the words they'd used and if Kangwon was really okay.

"See you, guys. Comrades." Chungbuk strode away. "And don't worry, Kangwon. I won't tell him by accident. SJ never actually told us to keep it hidden, so it just kind of slipped out."

"Oi, Kangwon." South Pyongan came to crouch by his side, her face serious. "Do you want me to come with you when you tell him?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No. It should be between us."

Korea might think Kangwon assumed he was going to strike him or something if he brought her as a bodyguard. Which wouldn't really be good for building an atmosphere for talking about the thing Korea hated talking about most- emotions.

His cousin nodded. "Alright. But I'll be there when you tell the other guys. If South Chungcheong says anything, I'll beat the shit out of her, I mean it. I know you can handle yourself, but she can be a mega-"

She squinted, slightly turning her head to SH, who narrowed her eyes at her, her smile holding a warning.

"Mean lady," she finished, turning back to him. "Mean, mean lady."

'Bitch,' she mouthed, shielding her face from SH's view with a hand.

"South Pyongan," their cousin said sweetly.

"Well!" She jumped up. "I'm heading out. See ya later!"

Kangwon shook his head, smiling as he got to his feet. His prediction for her had been that she'd either be really cool with it or really disgusted. He was glad it was the first one.

"Kangwon."

He turned to SH, and she clasped his hands in hers.

"I'm sorry I cornered you like that," she fretted. "I didn't think it would be something like that. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You're always taking care of us, and-"

"It's fine, SH." He patted her hand reassuringly. "I'm glad you did. I probably would have just put off talking to him for even longer if you didn't."

She gazed at him with eyes full of worry. "Don't stress yourself out

about this for any longer than you have to. Please tell him once you get back."

"I will," he promised, smiling at her. "Thanks."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "And don't worry about North Hamgyong. I'll knock some sense into him if he doesn't accept it."

She wouldn't be able to berate being comfortable around Kangwon into him if he wasn't anymore. But he appreciated the thought.

"Hyung." When she was gone, Gangwon caught the sleeve of his green workshirt. His brows were furrowed. "If Korea d-d-doesn't accept you..."

"He will," Chagang said, rising.

"But if he doesn't-"

"He will."

Kangwon didn't know if he meant it or if he was simply holding the belief in victory that the Northerners had clung to for so long.

*'Then again, we **did** reach victory before.'* That he had a free, Reunified Korea to fear telling about his preferences proved that it worked.

"Yeah," he said, smiling at his brother. "He will. He loves us. You're included in that."

Gangwon's lower lip wobbled, and he nodded. It looked like he'd say something else, but instead he just snuck a quick hug, then scampered away, leaving just him and Chagang.

"So," Kangwon said as they strolled out of the dining room. "How'd you know I like UIP?"

Chagang didn't glance at him. "You spend a lot of time alone together."

"So do Korea and China," he pointed out.

"Yes."

Kangwon knew he couldn't have been that obvious about it. If SH or North Hamgyong hadn't mentioned the time he spent with UIP as being suspicious (for different reasons), then it was doubtful Chagang had.

Then again, his cousin always *had* been uncannily perceptive. And difficult to get a good answer out of.

"Well, thanks," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "I... needed to hear that."

"Yes." Chagang dipped his head. "Tell him soon. You're hurting."

Kangwon picked guiltily at his ruined nails.

"I will," he promised. "Soon."

SH (bisexual): Wow, you're one of the gays? Must be hard. Too bad no one else around here can sympathize. Good luck telling Korea! (she will never come out)

North Hamgyong would be homophobic if it was anyone but Kangwon. He wouldn't *do* anything because he's a Socialist and Korea would beat him with a sandal and drag him off for re-education if he did, but for any other cousin, he would at least make a derogatory comment. But Kangwon? That's his buddy. His pal. They saw aliens together one time so how can he possibly call him a slur.

Also a firm assurance- the solution to UIP's problems as the United Israeli-Palestinian SSR was not 'oh, slap on the wrist for the Israelis, everyone gets along now.' It's the ideal solution of 'every Israeli that willingly emigrated and participated in land theft was returned to where they belong (America, Bulgaria, Russia, etcetera) and re-educated, and every proud member of the Israeli Occupation Force was executed. The few people that went to jail instead of serving, or ended up turning to support Palestinian liberation were allowed to stay. I think that's

realistic since most Palestinians *don't* want to exterminate every single Israeli on their lands, unlike most Israelis, and were fine living there with Jews until the formation of Israel and the Nakba.

Hard To Say (One-shot, Part 2)

[image]

Another month later

Korea knew that look. Y/N wanted something from him.

She had been waiting for him when he finished in his office, as she usually was. But instead of being bleary with sleep, she was sitting up, engrossed in a copy of the second volume of *'Anecdotes of Kim Il-sung's Life'* that she put down as soon as he came in, watching him attentively while he changed for bed.

His girlfriend (still an embarrassing word) tracked him around the room as he put his old clothes by the door and reverently placed the book she had been reading on the nightstand for her. She wasn't watching him with her usual indecent aspersions, but more in the way that a cat watched a mouse it was about to pounce on. Or Hae watched food be brought to the table.

It was the same way she had been looking at him ever since South Hamgyong had pulled her aside after dinner.

"What do you want?" he eventually sighed, once he was under the covers with her.

She pounced. "Have you noticed Kangwon's been acting... off lately?"

By 'lately,' she meant 'for over half a year.'

"It's fine," he clipped. "Kangwon wouldn't betray me. And I've been having him followed."

"I..." Y/N blinked. "What?"

"He hasn't turned," Korea repeated.

Chagang was skilled at reading others. He would have sensed if

something was wrong after all his intelligence-gathering. And even if he were too soft to turn one of his cousins over, South Hamgyong wasn't.

Korea, too, had taken a few days off over the months to tail his province, and more just last week. The man hadn't done anything suspicious. He had woken up early, headed to his provincial Party headquarters to work on his tasks for his various positions for his full eight hours, only taking a brief lunch break to eat instant noodles; conducted on-the-spot guidance for the Agricultural University; visited a local kindergarten to teach outdoor safety; finished the final examination of the tree planting and felling locations in his province; then went home to sleep. Every day had been like this, much as Chagang and SH had reported. Nothing inherently strange, on the surface.

But there was. Kangwon usually took a hike every day that he could, and while he had plenty of time on several of the recent days, he had gone straight home. On the others he had been twitchy, glancing around like he expected to be ambushed, though being in nature had always calmed him.

He hadn't been visiting the market as much, either, and a search through his trash had confirmed that he was mostly eating instant meals from stores, even though he preferred cooking fresh meals for himself when he was in his province.

His Provincehuman had always been social as well, but lately he had been politely declining invitations from their people to drink with him. And when at the high-rise, he wouldn't take time to decompress with the other provinces after dinner, or join them in the library or at the arcade, instead going straight to bed. North had frequently turned down 'family nights,' but unless he had work to do, Kangwon *never* did.

It had gotten worse once he had returned from going over the land surveys. He would rush from the dining room before anyone could get a word in, hastily bidding them goodnight before locking himself in his room. Korea had spent all night lurking in the stairwell on several occasions, but his province never left. And searching it while he was out provided no new clues.

And there was the disgusting nail-biting. Hands told you much about a person, and the state of his cuticles said nothing good about Kangwon.

All of these signs pointed to something being wrong. But the Provincehuman hadn't met with anyone out of the ordinary; Korea had gone over every single Party member that had enough power to attempt to blackmail him (and Kangwon wasn't susceptible to that, anyway); there was no money to embezzle anymore; he didn't seem to be involved with any tampering of the ration or credit systems, and the most contact he had with any underground criminal organizations was with a 'gang' of teenagers who had decided going swimming in Wonsan harbour at midnight was an acceptable pastime, and had to be talked out of it.

So *something* was wrong. But whatever it was, it had nothing to do with Korea.

"O-*kay," Y/*N said in that tone she used that he knew she had picked up from SH. "Kangwon isn't a traitor. But something's clearly bothering him."

"So?" Korea bluntly asked. "It isn't affecting his work."

"But it's affecting *him."* Y/N raised her brows pointedly. "So maybe you should... ask him if he's o-"

"No." Korea reached over, turning off the lamp and facing his back to her. "He'll work through it." If anyone could, it was Kangwon. "If he can't, then at least he won't have an excuse to keep acting like everyone's therapist."

"Some might call it 'concern for his friends and family,'" Y/N suggested.

"I know SH put you up to this," he told her. "Tell her to stop pestering me. It won't work."

The aggravating woman had learned that if there was anything she couldn't brute-force him into doing, she could call upon Y/N to enact psychological warfare, since he couldn't pull rank and order

her to shut up.

Well, he *could.* But then he would have to deal with SH even more. And Y/N herself.

"She's been pestering you because she's worried about Kangwon," Y/N said, wrapping her arms around his waist. When he didn't pull away, she shimmied closer, until her cheek was resting on his back. "She wants you to talk to him."

"That's her job, not mine." She and Kangwon were the ones who sorted out personal problems with the Provincehumans. Korea's duty was straightening out issues that affected their governance of their country.

"She says she did speak to him," Y/N said, peeking her head over his shoulder, her breath tickling his cheek. "And she thinks you should, too."

Korea snorted at that. "If *she* couldn't do anything about it, *I* won't be able to."

But that was concerning. South Hamgyong never would have went to him for something like this. Did she think the Reunification had changed him that much?

"Kangwon has been avoiding me, anyways," he said, trying to shove away how uneasy both those thoughts made him. It was likely only because he knew his Countryhuman would snap at him for his strange attitude lately.

"Then maybe it has something to do with you," Y/N suggested into his 'ear.' "So you should talk to him and see if you can find out what it is."

That plucked too neatly at both his halves. South's fear that those close to him secretly hated him because he was always doing something wrong, and North's that-

North didn't have any fears. Not personal ones. And neither did Korea.

"Did SH give you a script?" he complained.

Y/N cleared her throat, and he realized that was *exactly* something his province would have done. He was going to nitpick her work at the next Party plenary meeting.

"You would have never been able to talk North into this," he told her. "You're trying to make me act more like South."

"And *you're* trying to guilt-trip me." He could feel her smile against his jawline. "Which is what I hear South would have done."

The guilt he had been defensively trying to elicit in her backfired on him. Ssi-bal, he hated when he did that.

"I'm sorry," he muttered his apology, and she kissed his neck, accepting it.

"You *will* be if you don't go talk to Kangwon."

He heaved an exasperated sigh, turning over and flopping his arm across her chest.

"We don't talk about stuff like that," he said irritably. "It works better for everyone that way, and it always has."

South had always tried getting his provinces to talk about their feelings, the few times he had seen them during the decades of military dictatorship, and after, when he had started to throw them fancy parties and invite them to exclusive events. He'd always wanted to ask how they were doing and tell them that they could confide in him, hoping to make them like him more.

But it had never worked, since he refused to talk about what had happened during the war. Whenever he tried reaching out, he would be rejected, and the conversation would turn sour, ruining whatever good feeling he had managed to muster in them.

North, meanwhile, had *never* spoken to his provinces about how they felt and actively discouraged them from trying. The last heartfelt conversation he had shared with any of them had been

during the war, and each of those had been like chewing glass to him. And *their* bond was strong enough that having them followed when they were acting out of sorts was only ever a precaution.

It was why he... tolerated his provinces and China so much. They all understood that talking about things only made them worse.

He had only once spoken with his southern provinces about the past. When he had made his apology to them. On behalf of South for everything he had done, and on behalf of North, for taking so long to return.

And he and his northern provinces had never even acknowledged their exchange on the day that Pyongyang had been bombed.

'I'm not...'

'We know.' SH's smile hadn't been mocking or furious. It had been understanding.

'We always have,' Kangwon had said, his own smile easy and relaxed, even as bombs were falling outside. *'It doesn't change the fact that we're going to win.'*

They had been teetering on the brink of everything they had ever feared, and they had still looked at him with such assurance. With faith.

(Would Kangwon still look at him that way if he showed weakness now?)

Talking about it after would have only undermined it. They had known. All of them. And they had still followed him. What more needed to be said?

"Maybe it doesn't *always* have to work better that way," Y/N ventured.

"Y/N," he cut in, making sure he knew she was serious. "I am not CCCP. My provinces are not my children, and I am not their father. They are soldiers, and they don't need me to put a bandage on their scrapes and kiss them better."

"'A commander should treat his soldiers with familial love,'" the woman next to him smugly quoted.

"I'm banning you from interviewing soldiers."

Y/N sat up, her silhouette darker than the room as she peered down at him. "What if you *did* do something to upset Kangwon? Shouldn't you try to fix it?"

"Kangwon doesn't get upset," Korea denied. "And even if I did something, it wouldn't sway him. My provinces aren't individualist idiots. Even if they hated me, they would still do what was best for our country."

"I'm not talking about what's best for our country, I'm talking about what's best for *Kangwon,"* she stressed.

"What's best for Kangwon is getting over whatever's wrong with him. On his own." Korea turned over again, facing the window. "Now go to sleep."

"Okay, fine," Y/N said, agreeing to some inaudible proposal because she *clearly* wasn't agreeing to go to sleep. She grabbed his shoulder, pulling him over to face her again.

"No matter what he's going through, Kangwon wouldn't betray you and he wouldn't stop fighting for Korea. That's because he trusts you." Her eyes just barely reflected the light. "Do you think *maybe* the reason the provinces trust you so much and are willing to not talk about things is *possibly* because you *used* to be vulnerable with them?"

"I have never been vulnerable with *anyone,"* he denied, bristling as he sat up. "North or me."

Y/N looked him up and down, sitting in bed with her, his shirt slightly unbuttoned. He glared challengingly back.

"Fine," she said. "Maybe it's because you used to have *slightly* more vulnerable conversations than you do now that they have that trust and love towards you."

"They're not supposed to love me," Korea growled at her, skin prickling in embarrassment and heart fluttering. He would attribute that to South's desire for attention, and not ask if SH had relayed that to her. "And they trust me because I led them to Liberation, not because I've asked if they're feeling alright when they're acting like children."

Y/N raised her eyebrows slowly. "Are you saying emotions are something only children have?"

"No, I am *saying* that moping around and chewing your nails is childlike behavior, and that if I have to talk to Kangwon, I am going to *tell him* that." He was growing frustrated. "I'll make things worse and then you'll worry about him even more."

"Korea." She took his hands, though he tried to pull away from her. "From what they've told me, I don't think you've ever made things worse for them. You're not so bad at comforting people. And you've helped them out by talking to them before."

"Did South Hamgyong tell you to say that?" he demanded. Ssi-bal, he didn't think any of them would have ever shared their private conversations. They didn't with each other, so they shouldn't with Y/N.

"No." She shook her head, smiling. "It's just a hunch. If you took the time to ask some skittery foreign girl about her bruises, I doubt you've *never* talked to your provinces about how they're doing."

Korea flushed, looking away. "I don't..." He tried to put steel back in his voice. "I can assure you I have never talked to them about their feelings. I've only ever told them what they needed to hear to be better soldiers. I need weapons, not soft-bellied pushovers."

"Do you still need weapons?" Y/N asked softly, her gaze gentle. "Even now?"

"We are *always* going to need weapons." His voice was not soft. "If this generation puts theirs down, then the next won't have them when the time comes. And then their children will need to learn how to fight all over again."

Even with America gone, the world was not safe. CCCP had been betrayed before, China might one day turn, politicians came and went, powers rose and fell. Korea would *never* be one of the latter.

The Revolution did not stop when every threat was dormant. It had to be safeguarded. Giving up the Revolution was what had killed CCCP the first time. It hadn't gotten to kill North and it wouldn't kill Korea or his people. They would always hold their General and Juche and all those who had fought and died for them close. And the lessons they had passed down.

His people could rest. They could sling their firearms over their backs or rest them on their mantle as they went about living their prosperous lives that had been so hard won. So long as they remembered how to use them when they had to.

Korea could not. His provinces could not. The Worker's Party and the Korean People's Army could not. If they didn't keep their weapons in hand, then one day, they would be taken from them, along with everything else. Now that they had finally achieved Liberation, that could not be allowed to happen.

North had accepted long ago that he was a shield before anything else. It was too deeply ingrained in his being for the Reunification to have made his conviction waver even slightly. His provinces had accepted their lot as well. They were weapons, and Korea was their shield, all for the sake of their people.

Y/N was quiet at that, her hands still on his. He knew she couldn't comprehend it. The only human that ever had been able to had his portrait hanging over their futon next to his son's.

That was fine. It would only fill her with misplaced sorrow. She couldn't comprehend how much it meant to him to *be* that shield, either.

"Alright," she said eventually, still soft as a feather. "But I don't think it would blunt Kangwon's edge to have you ask him how he's feeling."

Korea looked down at their clasped hands, unable to meet her

eyes. "North never would have asked him."

He hated that part of him wanted to. It made him think of that stupid fucking question.

Her hand was warm on his cheek, devoid of the thick calluses and scars that marred his, but still rough with work. The moon had slid up into the window, enough to rime her face with silver as she gazed into his eyes.

"You can. It won't change how Kangwon sees you."

Korea leaned into her touch, exhaling in resignation. "You're not going to give up until I agree to speak with him, are you?"

"No," she admitted. "SH wouldn't let me if I wanted to. And I don't. Kangwon always looks after us. You should go look after him."

"...Fine," he muttered finally. "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Relief lit her face, and her smile turned less sad.

"Thank you."

"Gah." He turned his face as she pecked his cheek.

They lay back down, Y/N curling up to his chest. He was glad he was steady enough to embrace her back tonight. Ironically, Kangwon acting so out of character had made Korea feel more like North than ever, as paranoia and suspicious worry drove him to stalk one of his most reliable provinces.

"You know," he said into the silence, stroking Y/N's hair. "If I ordered Kangwon to lie to you and say that I spoke to him, he would do it."

"I know." She peered up at him. "I'm choosing to trust you as much as your provinces do, and believe you *won't* do that."

He grumbled a little, and she chuckled, laying her ear over his heart.

Korea stayed up even once her breathing had slowed, staring at the moon as it rose past their window and out of sight.

It would worry Kangwon to have him ask what was wrong. It would just make him ask more irritating questions about how he was doing with being Reunified.

But it was true that the usual methods hadn't been working. Korea had sent fresh fruits to his house in Wonsan, made sure to assign him to mostly outdoor tasks, and let him give him his monthly check-ups without a fuss. It couldn't have been anything that he did, or his silent apology would have been silently accepted and his province would have gone back to normal. Not that Kangwon had ever been the type to get upset over brusque words or harsh actions. He was far too understanding, to an extent that was frequently annoying.

He supposed it could do good to get to the bottom of the issue. It wasn't affecting Kangwon's work yet, but it could. Dealing with a problem when it arrived and not before was short-sighted. His province was too important to lose, after all.

Korea still briefly entertained the idea of passing the job off to their Supreme Leader.

No. His provinces were his responsibility. He would talk to Kangwon.

'Soon.'

___

A week later

"I'm going to go get some sleep." Kangwon stood up from the table, ducking his head to avoid the sharp look Korea gave him, and the tight smile on SH's face. "Night, comrades."

He didn't wait for anyone to answer, striding out of the dining room and to the elevator, slamming the button.

The dining room door opened before the metal doors could, and

he swiftly gave up on it, heading for the stairs without looking behind him, trying to keep his pace unhurried.

As soon as he was out of sight of the lobby, he took off running, taking the steps two at a time all the way up to the fifth floor, his thighs aching with the stretch.

He could hear the clack of sandals pursuing him, moving swiftly and with purpose on the white stone stairs, echoing as he tore around the corner and jogged down the hallway, wishing his room was closer.

"Kangwon!" a female voice called behind him just as he reached his door and darted in, quickly slamming it and engaging the lock, thankful that Korea was so strict about security.

"Kangwon!" SH was right outside now, jiggling the sliding door aggressively. "Open up!"

"Sorry, can't. I'm getting changed," he said, standing completely clothed in the center of his room.

It didn't sound like she believed him. "Then open the door once you're done."

"I'm sleeping naked tonight," he replied, looking around for something to block the door with. His dresser looked good.

His cousin yanked on the door more, then thumped a fist against it. "You said you would talk to him."

"And I will," he replied, tearing at his hangnails. "On my own time."

"Your own time is *killing* you." She hauled harder on the door, and he hoped that she hadn't reached her limit yet because he knew she was strong enough to kick it down. He sidled towards the side of the room. If she came charging in, he would slip out behind her and hope he could make it to his car in time.

"That's a little dramatic," he said, trying to find another nail to bite and failing. There were none left. "I'm just having some nerves."

"Well then *I'm* going to kill you!" SH sighed and he could hear her slumping against the door. "Kang, you know I wouldn't pressure you. But I've never seen you act like this before. It's worrying me."

Kangwon approached cautiously. His cousin wasn't above luring him into a false sense of security.

"I know," he sighed. "I'm sorry I've been spending less time with you comrades lately. I'm just... trying to think of what to say to him."

He usually didn't have to think about his words much. He easily knew what to say to comfort people most of the time, a valuable skill for a doctor to have.

But now he needed to pick the perfect string of words to tell Korea... what he had to tell him. He couldn't use loanwords because that would make him think of Westerners and prep him to be disgusted. And he might not even know their meaning. He couldn't beat around the bush because playing coy had always irritated his Countryhuman, but he felt like if he was too direct the shock of it would make him curl his lip.

"So let me in," SH pleaded. "I can help."

He knew she could. SH was their PR expert, their unofficial People's Propagandist. Hwang came up with the ideas and she sold them, making them pretty with her paintings and performances. Even if Korea had hated people like Kangwon with a passion, SH could write him a script that would convince him one of his provinces being homosexual was somehow good for their country.

But if she did, he would know they were her words and not Kangwon's. And while Kangwon might think that sometimes Korea applied the principal of Juche too stringently to personal relationships, he did believe in it as well. Self-reliance. You couldn't depend on others if you couldn't depend on yourself. If he leaned on SH for this, he would be letting Korea down.

Korea might already see him as an other after this. If Kangwon strayed from their core principals on top of that, and did something

he would see as weak...

Kangwon leaned his forehead on the door. "SH, I- I think I'm scared."

It wasn't a feeling he was used to. He didn't really get nervous, not for awhile. Sometimes when he was going for a night hike and thought he saw the stars moving too fast, yeah, or when there was a sudden creak in his house in Wonsan. But not like this. This was a sickening, heavy feeling of dread that he'd felt for his family and their people before, but never for himself.

"Kangwon..." He could hear her place her hand on the barrier between them, though there weren't any words of comfort that could penetrate it. He squeezed his eyes shut, his voice coming out in a whisper.

"I don't want to lose him."

It would be unfair. That Korea would look at him like he'd changed, when really he'd always been like this. It would mean that he never would have cared for him if he knew he was like this from the start.

"You won't," SH said fiercely. "We gave you doubts earlier, but we were being stupid. Chagang was right. Korea loves us too much to turn on you."

She didn't bother saying that if he didn't accept him at first, he would come around eventually. Even out of the Northern provinces, she would know better than most what he feared.

"I just..." He swallowed thickly, the lump in his throat almost painful, before whispering, "I just want things to be normal for a bit longer."

"They *aren't* normal," SH said desperately. "You're avoiding Korea, you're avoiding us, and you're making yourself sick."

But Korea still loved him. Even if he was giving him strange looks, reprimanding him over his nail-biting, and having him tailed, he still loved him. The anonymous basket of greenhouse

persimmons and wild berries that had shown up on his kitchen table were proof of that.

"Kangwon," his cousin softly begged. "Please open the door."

Kangwon's hand reached for the latch, wavering slightly before jerking back as a voice outside called, "South Hamgyong."

He leaped away from the entrance, and outside she did the same. He frantically looked around, deciding that his dresser now looked like a good place to hide behind.

"What are you doing?" Korea demanded, the deliberate thump of his footfalls on the carpet coming closer.

"It's a good night for tea, isn't it?" SH said brightly, not answering. "Do you want me to bring a cup of that pu'er China brought up to your office?"

There was a suspicious silence before Korea answered, "No. I don't want to be disturbed tonight. Inform the others."

That was... ominous.

"Okay!"

There was half a minute of intense silence before Korea ordered, "Now."

"But-"

"Now."

"Yes, Korea." SH's footsteps reluctantly retreated. Korea's did not.

Kangwon stood as still as he did when hunting deer, hoping that his light being off would make Korea think he was asleep. He had the patience of a hunter, and the minutes passing by wouldn't make him crack.

After a long while, he heard Korea's hand touch the door before he gave a slight hiss, knocking instead.

"Kangwon. Open the door."

He hesitated for a second, then hurried towards it, unlocking it and sliding it open.

"What is it, Korea?" he asked, smiling and trying not to sound too nervous. Or like he'd been tearing up.

His Countryhuman searched his face with a narrowed eye, his own expression ice cold. Kangwon swallowed, and his gaze dipped to his throat.

"I want you in my office," he said eventually, voice as frosty as his look. "Five minutes."

"What-"

Korea turned on a heel, marching away, and Kangwon's mouth felt too dry to call after him. He ducked back into his room, heart pounding.

Did he know? Had North Chungcheong accidentally told him? Or had he just decided that Kangwon must be a traitor, even if he didn't have proof?

Either one was bad. They both made his stomach swirl nauseatingly.

He needed to get to Korea's office. He couldn't be late or it would be worse.

Kangwon swiftly prepared, checking his reflection in his phone camera. He looked... haggard, to put it nicely. His cheeks were a little hollow since he hadn't been eating right in his capital, the bags under his eyes were almost as heavy as his lids, and there were little tension lines at the corners of them. If he'd seen one of their people on the street looking like this, he'd invite them out for a drink and ask what was going on.

He left his phone behind, his hands shaking as he left his room, marching down the hall towards the stairs to Korea's floor. The red carpeted corridor felt longer than usual, stretching out ahead of

him. Was this how someone heading to an execution felt?

Finally he reached the staircase. He looked up into the shadows for a few seconds, then began to climb, the faux-gold railing slick under his sweaty palm. Reaching the top floor, he stopped outside of Korea's office, his breath coming in quick, sharp pants.

"Come in." Korea's voice was low, which never meant anything good.

Kangwon sucked in another breath, unable to hesitate anymore at risk of upsetting his Countryhuman further.

He opened the door, stepping into the room and feeling the temperature drop.

Korea was sitting at his desk, under the portraits of Comrade Kim Il-sung and Comrade Kim Jong-il, his hands clasped tightly and his face severe. Kangwon knew that look. It meant he was in trouble.

"Sit," the other man ordered, like he was ordering the province into an electric chair.

Kangwon wanted to flee. But instead he shut the door behind him and sat, wiping his damp palms on his pants.

Korea briefly gave him a once-over. "...Why are you wearing a suit?"

Kangwon looked down at the black, double-breasted suit jacket and pants he was wearing. It was what he usually wore to Worker's Party meetings.

"...It was the first thing I grabbed," he lied.

Korea stared at the green-striped tie that had clearly been meticulously knotted, when Kangwon usually just threw on his clothes. He shook his head slightly, then pinned him with his glare again.

He said nothing. Just stared at him with incredible menace. Kangwon squirmed under the weight of it. Was that the look of 'I'm

waiting to see if you'll tell me what I already know first' or of 'I have something to say, but I want you nervous before I say it'?

Korea's expression remained as hard as if it was carved out of bedrock, refusing to speak their silent language to relieve the province even a little.

If it was the second one, it was working. Kangwon's heart hammered in his chest. He forced the edge of his tooth under the barely there nail, wincing as it scraped against a raw nerve. Korea's glower soured further at the action, and the Provincehuman quickly curled his hands into fists on his thighs, the fingers stinging as his sweat got into the exposed wounds left from ripping his hangnails off.

It was very silent in the office. Kangwon found himself staring past Korea to the portraits of their deceased comrades, wishing that the General were here.

He also wished he could have known what he would think of him.

Kangwon was usually pretty good at withstanding Korea's prolonged eye-contact. But he was tired, stressed, and hurting.

And he was really scared.

He broke.

"Korea-"

"Kangwon-"

They both snapped their mouths shut, Korea's jaw feathering as his glare intensified.

"Sorry," Kangwon said quickly. "You go."

"No. You."

"It's alright-"

"Kangwon," Korea growled dangerously, leaning forward. *"Speak."*

Kangwon tried to sear his look into his mind because even though it was murderous, it might still be the last time that Korea was thinking about murdering *his* province, instead of someone he didn't know.

He'd come up with hundreds of opening lines over the months. He couldn't think of any of them now. With a shaky inhale, he spread his bloody hands.

"I like men."

Korea blinked at him, expression blank. "What?"

His tone matched his face. His eye held a complete lack of comprehension. Kangwon wanted to look away before he could see it fill with disgust, but made himself keep steady.

He swallowed, fingers digging into his pant legs, blood welling in the cuticles. "It's kind of hard to elaborate on that. I like men. Romantically. I don't think you want more details than that."

Korea looked utterly dumbfounded now. He had straightened up and lost his professional composure. He cast a brief glance over his shoulder at the portraits, like he was asking them to confirm what he'd heard. Then he looked back at Kangwon.

"I- Why are you telling me this?"

'Might as well go all in.'

He shrugged, heart still trying to escape his chest. "Thought you should know. And I want your permission to court a man."

Korea's eye widened slightly. Kangwon still couldn't read any emotion but stunned disbelief in it as he glanced side to side, either looking for the man the province was talking about, or for South Pyongan, expecting her to jump out at him and say this was another prank.

Finding no one, he looked to Kangwon again.

"Who?"

"...UIP," he answered, gripping the edge of his chair and preparing to dodge a sandal.

Korea stood suddenly, making him quail a little. But his Countryhuman only stared at him, turned around, stared at the wall like he was gazing out the window at distant hills, glanced back up at the portraits, then turned back.

"Why?" he asked.

Kangwon raised a brow. "...Why... do I like men?"

"Why do you want to court *UIP?"* Korea demanded. "What's wrong with you?"

Kangwon flinched, though the words hadn't been any harsher than usual. It still seemed like his Countryhuman's main emotion was bafflement right now. He wasn't disowned yet, but what he was saying also hadn't sunk in yet.

"I... like him a lot," he answered both of the questions, flushing.

Something entered Korea's eye now. A spark of anger.

"Did he do something to you?" he demanded, prowling towards the province. "Did he hurt you?"

"No!" Kangwon hastily denied, sensing that his Countryhuman was about to declare war on his fellow republic. "I mean... we did... kiss," he added, embarrassed, as Korea circled him like a herding dog checking for invisible injuries before ending up behind his desk again.

He looked stricken. "Do *not* tell me that."

"We never did anything else," Kangwon promised, half-babbling. "I'd never go behind your back and I wouldn't do anything without permission-"

"Stop talking," Korea ordered tightly, and the province's jaw clacked shut. Yeah, he didn't really want to talk about that with him, anyways.

His Countryhuman turned his back to him, his arms in a military brace as he gazed up at the portraits again. Kangwon could see that the hands that gripped his forearms were white-knuckled.

Slowly, he raised a finger to his mouth before Korea ordered, "Hands down," without even looking at him.

Kangwon quickly clasped them in his lap, unable to do anything but wait as his Countryhuman processed his words.

"I'm sorry, Korea," he murmured, unable to help it.

He wasn't sorry for who he was. It wasn't like he'd had a choice in the matter, and he was too comfortable in his skin to wish he was someone else.

But he was sorry that his Countryhuman might lose his left hand.

"Do you love him?"

Kangwon's head jerked up, staring at him wide eyes. He'd expected to see the disgust now, but Korea was staring back with a mirrored expression, like Kangwon had been the one to ask the question, not him.

"I..." He thought of UIP's soft touch as he cradled his face, and the look in his eyes as he confirmed that Kangwon was important.

"I'd like to find out," he answered sincerely. "If you'd let me. I get it, though, if I can't," he added. "If it would harm our country in any way. Then it's okay as long as-"

'You accept me.'

He looked down. "I thought you should know, anyways."

Korea was silent for long enough that he started to tremble. He tried to keep it subtle as he looked up from under his lashes.

His Countryhuman was just... staring at him blankly. Still no disgust, but also nothing else. He was a light breather, too, so Kangwon couldn't even see his chest rising and falling. He might as

well of been one of the statues on Mansudae Hill.

The province tried to chew a nail, then startled as his hand was suddenly slapped away from his mouth.

"For the last time," Korea growled. "Cut that out."

His Countryhuman straightened up, putting his shoulders back and resuming his military posture, his eye finally hardening again as he loomed over him. Kangwon braced himself.

"Fine."

His heart stopped. "What?"

"Don't make me repeat myself," the man snapped.

Kangwon didn't allow himself to hope that he understood him right. "When you say 'fine...?'"

"I mean *fine,* you can court UIP," Korea said, and his lip curled in disbelief, not disgust.

The province blinked dumbly at him. "Really?"

"If you act like an idiot, I'll change my mind," his Countryhuman clipped. "And there are ground rules. No acting like a couple in public. No telling anyone outside of our immediate circle. And if you *ever* choose him over our country-"

"I wouldn't," Kangwon assured him, standing. He felt so light-headed that he almost swayed, but he managed to look the other man in the eye.

"Nothing is more important to me than Korea."

His Countryhuman searched his face, then nodded. "Good. Nothing is more important to Korea than its provinces and people."

Kangwon's lips started to curve. He couldn't really believe this was happening. Maybe SH had ended up kicking down his door and knocking him out, and now he was dreaming.

Korea's eye suddenly narrowed, making him nervous again.

"Was that why you've been acting so weird?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Kangwon admitted shamefully. "I was worried that... I was a little nervous about telling you. Thank you for... allowing me."

Korea closed his eye, exhaling, then said, "We're done here, then."

Kangwon dipped his head, moving cautiously for the door, half-prepared for Korea to call him back. He reached for it, then paused, turning around.

He knew they wouldn't talk about this again, so he had to ask now.

"You really don't care?" he ventured hesitantly. "You don't think I'm... a degenerate or anything?"

"I do," Korea said bluntly. "You're all degenerates."

"But you don't..." Kangwon swallowed. "You don't see me differently?"

"Why would I? I don't give a damn who you... *interact* with, so long as it doesn't interfere with your work, and our people still come first."

Korea's hand twitched, half-raising to his arm before he trapped it behind his back again.

"You're my province, Kangwon. Even if I did, I wouldn't discard a good blade just because it has a nick in it."

The words were as harsh and utilitarian as ever. The way Korea wouldn't meet his eye made Kangwon smile.

"Thanks," he said, almost choking on the word as his entire body was flooded with joy and relief so strong that he could've curled up in a ball on the office floor.

"Now get out of here."

He turned around, making it clear the conversation was done. His province's heart was light as he floated to the door before pausing again.

"Didn't you call me here to talk about something?"

"It's unimportant," Korea dismissed, and for some reason, the brief look Kangwon got at his face showed immense relief.

His Countryhuman snuck another one at him over his shoulder.

Kangwon quirked the corner of his lips. *'Love you, Korea.'*

Korea looked away again, and his Provincehuman left the office like a man whose death penalty had been repealed, loosening his uncomfortable tie and allowing his hands to swing, free of the desire to gnaw on them for the first time in months.

Korea didn't think he was disgusting or aberrant. He hadn't looked at him like he was strange and foreign. He could even tell UIP that they could be together, to see what happened. And most importantly...

Kangwon grinned, unable to help it as he hopped down the stairs, glowing with warmth.

Before he had turned away, the corner of Korea's lips had flattened in return, an embarrassed admittance.

'I love you, too.'

I think Kangwon is the top in his relationship because he has a vague feeling inside that Korea would be disappointed in him if he wasn't. And he's probably right.

Also Kangwon is the (unofficial) eldest son because he was North's first Provincehuman, he's the most emotionally stable, and he has the special bond with North of being the only one to really ever see him truly vulnerable. SH is the (unofficial) eldest daughter because she's the most responsible, craved family ties and managing people, and wanted the role. But also because she has similar trauma to North, and subconsciously

feeling that, he said, 'This woman needs responsibilities and is capable of withstanding whatever burdens I make her carry.'

I'm With You (One-shot, Side A)

?93□

North Korea knew war. He had been fighting one for most of his long life.

So as the sound of terrified screams, choke of acrid smoke, and smell of spilled blood and burning flesh invaded his senses, his body was already reacting, panic surging inside of him even before his mind had fully regained consciousness, scattered thoughts swirling around.

'No, not again, not again.' One of America and South's test nuke runs at the border had finally been real and they were here, here to bring pain to his people again to try and bring them to their knees. He had spent so long strengthening their defenses, he was supposed to have more warning, more *time,* but they were right-

As North's eye snapped open, he found that the movement that should have carried him with gun in hand from his futon to his wardrobe to snatch his ever-ready General's uniform had instead only moved him several steps forward.

He was already standing, already outside. And his Type 70 was nowhere to be seen.

The disorientation of it made his head swirl for a moment before he snapped into combat-readiness. To his Supreme Leader, get him to safety and away from South's decapitation squads, acquire a weapon, then meet up with the Minister of National Defense-

But as he tried to gain his footing, North realized he wasn't outside the high-rise, or in Kim Il-sung Square or anywhere that he recognized. And he knew every ri of his severed country, had visited every single village within the last five years. And none of them were as primitive as this one.

A dirt road with ruts from cart wheels carved into it, bordered by looming houses, cracked plaster and stone walls smeared with filth, garbage scattered outside broken windows. The arched roofs that cast shadows on the dusty ground were covered in chipped clay tiles. Even the most rural areas of his country were neater than this.

Also, none of his villages looked so... *Chinese.*

A sudden rush of footsteps caught his attention, and as if from nowhere, a crowd surrounded him, screaming and crying out in fear as they tried to rush down the street, away from some unknown danger, their bodies a panicked crush.

North didn't bother trying to grab anyone's attention. He knew flights like these. Instead he squared his shoulders and forced his way through them, heading perpendicular to the refugees until he was free of their press, sheltered in a side alley where he could finally try to figure out what the fuck was going on.

The street outside was silent now, the cries fading into the distance in a way that seemed strangely rapid.

He wasn't in Korea. He knew that much. The architecture around him was unmistakably Chinese. But not China as he was now, with glittering steel buildings that scraped the sky and endless roads filled with neon lights and people dressed in high-end clothing, carrying devices that would have once cost a lifetime's salary.

This was China as he had been decades ago, with narrow, dirty streets and houses sinking in on themselves, barely standing straight, let alone reaching for the blood red sky.

But even back when North had visited just after his war, already Socialist influence had been evident- newly-built buildings, red flags fluttering from windows, slogans carved into walls and sign boards. Wherever he was had none of those.

North obviously hadn't seen *every* backwater place that his comrade still had, but it seemed unbelievable that he would ever let one become this run-down and miserable.

But it *did* seem Chinese. Which meant China and his people were in danger. He had to find him. If China was at war, then North was, too.

He was pulled from his thoughts of where to find his comrade by another cry from the streets, the shriek of a woman.

He cautiously poked his head out of the alley, looking left and right.

All he needed to see was a Chinese woman on the ground, her back to one of the ramshackle buildings with two men looming over her. He didn't need more than a second to recognize the uniforms as Japanese and leap to act.

North shot from the alleyway, slamming into one of them at full speed, knocking him away from the woman. While that one was regaining his feet, he spun, taking the other by the head and smashing him face-first into one of the dirty stone walls, leaving a smear of blood. The man crumpled, unmoving. Hopefully he was only unconscious. North needed someone to interrogate.

The second had just managed to stand before he was kicked in the stomach, sent sprawling away. North hurriedly stomped on his head, crushing his skull.

It had been years since he had killed. He was glad to see he was as efficient as ever.

The woman was still crouched on the ground, her dark hair covering her face as she sobbed in distress.

"Are you alright?" North demanded in rusty Mandarin, moving towards her. *"What's happening here?"*

Her head suddenly jerked up, a piercing scream emanating from her, and the Countryhuman stumbled back, not from the cry, but from what he saw.

She had no face. Where her features should be, including the mouth she was wailing from, was only a smooth mask of flesh.

North overcame his shock, reaching out for her. *"What the fuck did they **do** to you?!"*

But as he touched her shoulder, the woman gave way under his fingers as she *melted.* Flesh and muscle sloughed away from pearly bone, running down her body. Her white and green dress dissolved into it as her entire being turned to a viscous crimson liquid, too thick to be blood. It ran across the dirt, flowing into the pools of gore that the men had also become, and he realized that when his hand had touched the soldier's face, it, too, had been unnaturally smooth.

North flinched back before the strange blood could touch the boots he didn't remember putting on, gazing around wildly as the scream continued to resound, no longer coming from a source but seemingly from everywhere.

His heart was pounding wildly, but his shoulders suddenly untensed.

A dream. That's what this was.

North had seen millions of people die. None of them had dissolved into goop. He wouldn't even begin to know how you would engineer that. That, along with the unnatural bloody red sky, the faceless people, and the fact that the last thing he remembered was bidding China goodnight before falling asleep in his Pyongyang high-rise on Victory Day let him know that this couldn't possibly be real.

But it was strange that it *felt* so real. The stench of smoke and blood filled his 'nose,' and the impact as he had slammed that man's head into the wall had reverberated though his arm. And could you usually think and choose what you did in a dream?

Actually, hadn't China once mentioned something like this? He had told North over drinks one time that he sometimes knew when he was dreaming, and could control it, feel and see things that he wanted to, and create scenarios. But the Korean couldn't remember the term he had used, since after he had made the mistake of asking what he usually dreamed of, his comrade had given him one of his

sly smiles that meant he absolutely did not want to know.

North didn't tend to dream. The only one he had was that nightmare. And while he could certainly *feel* it, he could never remember that he was dreaming and that it was over and done with. The only thoughts he had were the ones he'd had back then of pain, fury, helplessness and a determination to live.

And he couldn't control it.

But since he had realized he was dreaming now, maybe he could.

North concentrated his full will into trying to wake up, and when that didn't work, trying to force the unpleasant surroundings into the comforting blackness he was used to.

That didn't work either.

He huffed, remembering what China had once said when he told him he didn't dream.

'I'm not surprised. Every single drop of your imagination goes towards your country, leaving your personal well dry as the Taklimakan.'

North knew him well enough to know that it had been an insult.

He *'tch'*ed out loud, deciding to set off into the city and away from the piles of red that had been people.

Despite knowing he was dreaming now, the world around him was no less disturbing. As he walked, more crushes of civilians would appear out of nowhere before disappearing just as suddenly, pursued by Japanese soldiers with dripping tachi and guns. All of them were faceless.

Fires flickered from open windows and over rooftops in the distance, filling the crimson sky with a haze that did nothing to cover the red sun beating overhead, a baleful eye glaring down on the tortured city. It wasn't that the flames and smoke had turned them that colour. It was if they had always been soaked in blood, and always would be.

But despite the fiery glow, it was bone-chillingly cold. No wind stirred the smog overhead, yet it still seemed to cut into North's insides like a blade, trying to flay the skin from his flesh.

Screams echoed from everywhere, sometimes right next to him when no one was there to make them. They would grow louder and louder, ringing in his skull in a way that was actually painful, making him clutch his head, before cutting off with an abruptness that could only mean the person making them had been slaughtered, if there had been a person at all.

North couldn't help but intervene whenever he caught one of the faceless soldiers in the middle of committing their violence. He knew the people around him weren't real, and would only dissolve into more of that disgusting bloody sludge once they were saved, but the terror in their voices was so genuine that before he knew it, he was smashing another Japanese soldier into the ground until he was dead.

He didn't look at the naked woman he had rescued until the thick liquid she had become creeped slowly into the corner of his vision. Most of the actions he stopped had been so vile that he was almost overtaken by the old urge to keep beating the Japs once they were dead. And most of the people they were being committed against were women, almost disproportionately.

*'Why the **fuck** would I dream about this?'*

He had seen many things that had left scars, from atrocities committed by the Japanese to those committed by the Americans and Southern reactionaries, to the overall carnage of war. If he had dreamed of something like this about his own country, he would despise it, but it would make sense.

But this wasn't Korea. It was China. And not China as he knew him or even *had* known him.

As he walked the dirty, claustrophobic streets, he became more and more convinced that this was China before his People's Republic. The characters on the signs that hung above shops were blurred and unreadable, almost seeming to twist into disturbing

shapes before his eye. But none of them were accompanied by stars or hammers and sickles, and as hard as he searched, he still couldn't find a single red flag. He saw no People's Liberation Army soldiers or militia members trying to save their people. And on a closer look, the Japanese soldiers that dissolved under his attacks weren't wearing modern uniforms, but the old drabs the Imperial Army had worn.

The most he had seen of pre-Socialist China were the borderlands in Manchuria, small villages and army encampments, and the vast, cold mountains. He might accept that he would dream of his comrade's lands if his mind went back to the Arduous March. Ri upon ri of marching on an empty stomach, pursued by the Japanese over terrain that rose and fell endlessly while his soldiers gritted their teeth and walked on on aching feet, knowing that they had to reach their homeland. It inspired their descendants, but for anyone on the march, it had been a hundred day-long nightmare.

But why would he dream of a Chinese city he had never even seen?

North was starting to think he was going in circles. The narrow streets and cramped alleys all looked the same, and almost seemed to be squeezing around him as he moved, drawing closer until it felt hard to breathe.

The only interruption had been when he was spat out on a riverbank that was lined in shapeless masses shrouded in corpse cloths. Something had been rooting among them, a hulking man that had seemed more beast than human, making squelching chewing sounds. It had raised its faceless, bloodstained maw from its meal to sniff the air and North had quickly backpedalled into the maze.

Ssi-bal, maybe Kangwon was right. He *should* consider therapy. Not that he was ever going to tell *anyone* about this.

North's internal compass had never let him down, but it was completely skewed here. Still, he thought he might be moving in spirals, the roads constricting as he got closer and closer to whatever was at the center of this awful place.

Good. Maybe it was like one of those myths Hwang liked to babble about. If he killed the thing at the center of the labyrinth, he could escape. It was fanciful, but this *was* a dream.

He hoped it was Imperial Japan. Even if it was just a dream, it would feel good to claim the justice he hadn't in real life. He would feel better if he had been able to claim any of the enemy weapons before they melted away, but his bare hands would be suitable. This wasn't like his usual nightmare. Even unarmed, he wasn't helpless here.

After what could have been hours or minutes in streets no wider than his shoulders, he rounded another sharp, identical corner and came face to face with the tip of a dagger.

North blinked, startling back. Despite the monotony, he hadn't been growing careless. The violence had been growing scarcer as he wound into the center of the maze, but it had still been happening. And the screams had kept him tense and on edge. No one should have been able to ambush him.

He followed the sharp edge of the already blood-soaked Japanese tanto to find a familiar red face on the other end.

"China?"

His comrade's eyes narrowed at his name. Their white surfaces were visible, another confirmation that this dream was set in the past.

"Who are you?" China demanded, his voice sharp and blunt in a way North had never heard it.

"Korea," North replied cautiously. He supposed it made sense that the China of the past wouldn't recognize him.

China's blade didn't waver. His eyes flicked over North's red-banded face, an open wariness in them. "Liar. That isn't the flag of Korea. Last chance- *who are you and what are you doing here?"*

North had never seen his comrade like this. It was definitely China, with his Manchurian maple leaf-shaped eyes and fine-boned

face. His skin almost looked darker than usual, but the features and body were all the same.

North could tell that because he was shirtless. The only clothes he was wearing were a pair of thin Japanese army boots with a hole in the toe and an oversized pair of drab pants that hung low on his narrow hips. He was thinner than he usually was, but his build was similar, and North could see a few small scars he recognized, as well as cuts that would become scars he recognized.

But everything about his bearing was wrong. China usually carried an ease to him, even when under duress. North had once been pinned down with him in enemy territory while he wheezed through a lung that had a bullet hole in it, and he had still exuded an airy arrogance right up until he passed out. He was always poised and in control, with a smile that ranged from neutral, mocking, or menacing. And sometimes genuine.

China wasn't smiling now. His lips were tight and thin, his jaw set as he eyed North with open suspicion and a cold predatoriness. He could tell that at the slightest movement, he would use that tanto on him.

And he was soaked in blood. No, not blood. That thick gore that all of the dream-people had melted into.

It soaked the right side of his head, obscuring his flag, dripping over his eyes and down his cheeks like bloody tears. It streamed over his shoulders and muscular chest, seeped over his ribs in rivulets and stained the waistband of his stolen pants. It soaked the ground of the alley, and in the short time he had been standing at the mouth, it had pooled around him, a puddle of blood that was constantly widening. As he held the knife towards North, a droplet dripped off of it and onto his own boot.

It didn't look like any of it was coming from China's wounds, or even from enemies he had cut down. It looked more like it had been poured over him. Or like it was seeping out of his pores.

The part of North's mind that was always prepared to defend himself noted that the other man would be easy to knock off

balance. He stood slightly hunched, with a tenseness that suggested he was injured, his stomach maybe, or...

'Back.'

North thought he knew where they might be.

"Answer me," China said sharply, his knuckles shifting on the tanto in a way that meant he was about to attack. To give himself away like that wasn't like him, either.

"I *am* Korea," North repeated before he could lunge. "It's just- Ssibal, it's difficult to explain. Are we in Nanjing?"

China imperceptibly flinched at the name, which was still too perceptible for him. "You know where we are. Where's your master? Tell him to come back and deal with me himself. I won't miss again."

North knew he shouldn't make the situation any more tense, but he couldn't help it.

"Japan is *not* my master!" he growled, stepping closer. The tanto pricked his neck, and he mustered every ounce of control he had not to smack it away from him.

China blinked, and his grip on the blade loosened slightly, though he still didn't lower it. "So you say. Then what are you doing in my city?"

What *was* North doing in Nanjing? Was this... *China's* dream?

It didn't make any sense, but it still made more sense than North dreaming about his comrade's country like this, or his *comrade* like this.

And it meant China was the one that needed therapy, not him.

"I... know you," he said, because what else was he supposed to say?

China's eyes narrowed further. "I've never met you in my life."

"I didn't say we'd met," North snapped. "I said I *know* you."

"Prove it."

North searched quickly for a way to do that. Telling China that he knew his back was covered in lash marks wouldn't help. He would just think North had been at the demonstration. And since this was Nanjing, that meant it was 1937 or early 1938. Who knew how China's beliefs and opinions could have changed in the thirteen years before they would meet?

Something that China had said to him during the war surfaced in his mind. It was something North had adopted for himself, the second half of it at least. And it had been said with enough conviction that it was surely a long-held belief.

Taking a chance, North said, "You value sincerity more than anything, even though you're a chronic liar. And you think honesty is for fools-"

"'And those with nothing to lose,'" China finished with him, and the knife was finally moved away from North's throat.

'Good.' His instincts wouldn't have been able to tolerate it for much longer.

The Chinese man straightened slightly, though he still hunched with hidden pain. He gave North a considering look. "I suppose you do know me. And if I told you something like that, then we must be quite close."

"Too close," North muttered, glaring at the tanto.

"But that still doesn't tell me what you're doing here." China examined him again, eyes moving from his military-grade boots to the black trousers and white workshirt he slept in. "And dressed so nicely. I didn't think Korea was so wealthy."

Wealthy? SH made most of North's clothes for him, but it wasn't like they were made of silk and velvet. It was cotton, and not even soft cotton at that. It was the same durable blended material his military uniforms were made from.

Though he supposed for a still-feudal China, that would seem wealthy. Ssi-bal, he would spit blood if he saw what *he* wore in the future.

Real life. North hadn't gone time-travelling. This was a dream.

"Take this." North unbuttoned his nightshirt and held it out to China.

His comrade's eyes slid past it to North's now bare chest, clearly examining the thick scar that stretched across it.

"Japan," North gruffly explained. "Take the shirt."

"I'll get it bloody." China was still eyeing his scars with interest. It made North uncomfortable, as people staring at him always did, but also strangely relieved. The spark of curiosity in his eyes was more familiar than the wary, icy glare.

"And I'm going to throw up if I have to keep looking at all that blood," North retorted, shoving the clothing into the man's hands before crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's my people's." With that unnervingly flat comment, China put his knife between his teeth and started to shrug on the shirt, leaving bloody handprints on the fabric.

Ssi-bal, now that North was standing still and shirtless, it was even colder. And China had been wandering around like that with open wounds.

His comrade buttoned the shirt up all the way, uncommon for him when he wasn't wearing Mandarin collars. He was taller than North, yet it fit fine. It didn't do much to hide the mess he was covered with, since the thick liquid immediately soaked through, making the fabric glisten wetly, and was still dripping down his forehead. But at least the other Countryhuman would be warmer.

"Thank you," China said, tanto back in hand. "But you've been dodging my question. You might know me, but I still don't know why you're here."

North hesitated, then said, "To help."

The call-and-response was familiar to them from decades ago, or a decade later. But the roles were reversed.

"Oh?" The idea seemed to amuse China. "And how do you intend to do that?"

His sentences were getting more elaborate, slipping into the silky tone he usually used, which made North a little less tense.

How *did* he intend to help? He had been hoping to kill whatever awaited in the depths of the city and wake up, and if this was China's dream, then doing that would make sense. But as much as he sometimes wanted to strangle his comrade to death, the idea of taking that tanto from him and actually using it to hurt him was... repulsive to North. Especially when he was like this.

He looked at the dark shadows under China's eyes. "When was the last time you slept?"

"Awhile."

Of course. It was hard to sleep when you were being hunted, when every shadow held danger and every person was a threat, and you had no one to stay awake for you.

"Then get some," North ordered. "I'll keep watch."

"I can't. I have things I need to do."

As if to prove his point, another bloodcurdling scream rose over the city, ululating wildly. North couldn't tell whether it was male or female, but it was human. And it was clear that they were experiencing a pain and terror beyond what most people knew.

"I need to help my people." The silk was gone from China's voice again, the hard glint back in his eyes. "I need to save them."

North knew what had happened to Nanjing. He knew China couldn't. And China knew that, too, even now.

Still, if this had been real life and those had actually been China's people out there, North would have agreed with him. He would have carved his way through the Japanese soldiers to save them, just like China had done with him in Seoul. An action that suddenly made more sense, if this really was what Nanjing had been like for him.

But the faceless people weren't real. They were China's memories. This China might not be real, either, but he *felt* real.

"That was far away," he said to him, adding words he said to his provinces, but never himself, "And you're not going to be able to save anyone if you're half-dead from exhaustion."

China hesitated, and North realized what *he* would need to hear.

"I'll help you save them when you wake up."

"Why?" his comrade asked, tearing his gaze from the mouth of the alley.

North thought for a moment, then said, "Because I *really* fucking hate the Japanese."

A smile twitched at the corner of China's lips, and he slumped to the ground like his legs had been waiting to release him.

"Alright," he gave in. "I'll let you guard me."

North sat next to him, facing the exit. He hated that that was the only way in and out. It made him feel trapped. But at least it was a good chokepoint. There was just enough room to maneuver, but not more than one person could try and get in at a time.

He glanced over at China, who was curling up on the ground along the back wall of the alley, his legs drawn up to fit. The shirt clung wetly to his back, outlining the gouges there.

Was that why the streets had been getting so narrow? Not to suffocate North, but to draw protectively around China? This dream-Nanjing was less of a labyrinth with a fictional monster

lurking at its center and more a burrow that North's comrade had dragged himself into like a wounded animal.

There wouldn't have been anywhere like that in real life. Nowhere to rest, let alone sleep. Only danger and death around every corner, a feeling North knew well.

He didn't really want to do this, but....

It *was* a dream.

The Korean sighed, shifting into a cross-legged position and patting his thigh.

In a heartbeat, China had picked himself up off the frozen dirt and lain back down with his head in North's lap, which was especially irritating because he didn't know him at this point.

"Comfy," he remarked, looking up at him. "But I'd prefer silk. You should take this, if you're going to look out for me."

"Keep your tanto," North said gruffly, pushing it away. "You would really sleep with your head in a stranger's lap and give him your knife?"

"No," China replied, setting the blade on the ground beside him. "But you're clearly not a stranger."

Just because he had been able to quote that line to him. His comrade was both one of the most clever people he knew and the most careless.

"So you've really always been like this?" North asked, deadpan.

China nodded. "For as long as I can remember, anyways. And what about you? Are you always this lenient?"

He would *never* have let the real China do this. It would have been far too embarrassing. The only reason he was able to tolerate it now was because it was a dream, and because of how... familiar all of this was.

North looked up and away from him. "No. Just with you."

From the corner of his eye, he could see his comrade searching his face, then smiling, his first real one.

"Then we truly must be close," he decided, turning away from the mouth of the alley and towards North, resting his cheek on his thigh. "In that case..."

No blood stained North's pants. The red tears had dried up and vanished, along with the rest of the gore that had covered China, leaving him dry and warm in North's white shirt. The streets outside the alley had grown silent, no more echoing wails of pain and fury rising over them.

China's teeth flashed up at him as he murmured, "I'm looking forward to meeting you, Chaoxian."

As his eyes slid shut and he nuzzled into North's leg, his smile faded, which meant he was actually asleep.

North finally looked fully back at his face, examining the flag that had been revealed by the disappearing blood.

It matched one of his suspicions, though since this was a dream, he couldn't take it as proof. He supposed he would probably never get his real confirmation. China loved his secrets too much. He would likely hate that North was seeing any of this.

Regardless of which China China had been, North wished he really had been there for him like this. Because he was still...

Even though it had grown quiet, North put his arm on his comrade's now-uninjured side, fixing his eye on the mouth of the alley.

Usually China was the one that had to safeguard him and his country, in the Fatherland Liberation War, in the UN, from the sanctions. He couldn't fight off everything, but he did his best. Even if it was a dream, North would return the favour.

He wouldn't let anything hurt his friend.

The sliver of red sky overhead faded to blue, then to black, and the world beyond the alley started to melt away, first the buildings across the street vanishing, then the street itself, then the alleyway, until it was just North and China.

North felt himself starting to grow tired, but he kept his eye open, keeping vigil as everything turned to a soft, comforting black, and the only thing he could sense was the weight of China's head in his lap and his steady heartbeat under his palm.

He was still watching over him as the dream faded away.

***Technically* this would be more impactful if certain scenes in Chasing Liberty were read first. But I wrote it and also I still can't read maps and am stalling for time . So here you go. Come back and read this and part two after we're farther in Chasing Liberty. (part 2 will not be published until tomorrow; see 'stalling for time')**

I'm With You (One-shot, Side B)

[image]

19□¿

China knew right away that he was dreaming.

Usually it took a few minutes to realize things around him weren't as tangible as they could be, but this time he knew before he even 'opened his eyes,' so to speak.

First of all, he had gone to sleep in his room at North's high-rise after their Victory Day celebrations, and now he could feel the flow of outside air on his skin.

Second, the city he was in was certainly not Pyongyang.

Perhaps it could have been, eighty or more years ago. The road he was standing on was made of dirt, not pavement, with no lush summer trees to provide shade. No fantastical, corkscrewing apartments in the pastels that North so liked rose around him. The only buildings were an eclectic mishmash of Western, Japanese, and Korean, built small and low with clapboard and stone, and tin or tile roofs. And most importantly, there wasn't a single giant motivational signboard with Socialist red lettering to be seen.

China looked around, trying to gauge if the city was a real place he was dreaming of, or some version of feudal Korea created by his own impressions of it.

Ah, there was Mount Bugak and the three other mountains rising north of the city. It was Seoul, then. Seoul on a nice, early spring morning, in the 1920s or soon before. After that decade had been when the Japanese had truly started to 'modernize' Korea. And by that he meant 'impose even more of their own traditions and aesthetics upon them.'

'Actually...'

China tipped his head to the side, gauging the seemingly normal, if a bit shabby-looking, neighbourhood he was in.

Perhaps *not* such a nice spring morning. The air was strangely heavy, like it was before a storm, though the sky was clear. It sat oppressively on his shoulders with a feverish heat that he knew couldn't be abated with a fan. There was a trace of iron and fear lingering in the stagnant streets, hinting that if one were to venture into them, they might encounter something unpleasant.

And there was no sun. It didn't linger in the grey sky, freshly risen, and its rays didn't crest the horizon with the promise of appearing. It simply wasn't there.

Desiring a more pleasant atmosphere, China tried to will it into existence, or to at least stir up a breeze.

As he thought, neither worked. Nor did trying to change his wardrobe from the silky red robe he had gone to sleep in.

Though he was conscious of the fact that he was dreaming, the world around him lacked the malleability it was supposed to have. When he lucid-dreamed, his surroundings felt like clay to be molded to his desires.

Those desires were usually only to play sandbox and see what certain buildings would look like were they to be made, or to remodel villages or dream of music that couldn't be replicated in the waking world. And he didn't often do that last one. As beautiful as the melodies could be, he didn't see much use in something that human creativity had no part in.

Though he would admit that sometimes he summoned a dragon and experienced what it would be like to ride one. Just every so often.

Anyway, this Seoul didn't feel like it would bend to his whims. It felt static, carved into immutable, morbid existence.

Was it possible this was someone else's dream? North's or one of his provinces? If this was their old capital under Japan, then it

would make sense for it to feel that way.

Was that possible? Who knew. But since China currently couldn't plan out even more levels for Chongqing, or go flying, he supposed it wouldn't hurt to look around. He knew North had been lying when he told him he didn't dream, and he had been awake for at least one of the times he had. Perhaps he could meet up with him here.

Wanting to hear his friend say something like, 'Can't I get away from you in my own fucking dream?' while glaring at him, China chose a direction at random, setting off into the old streets of Seoul.

He never dreamed of North, in the same way that he didn't dream of his provinces or his cellphone. The more familiar you were with something, the less it showed up in your sleep.

He hadn't used to dream of his Chairman. But recently he had started showing up in the normal ones, watching him, never speaking. China could never speak, either, only able to know that he had been there when he awoke.

Of course, if he wanted to, he could make North feature in his lucid dreams. But he didn't. He never brought real people into them. It wouldn't be wise to grow too used to interacting with someone in a way he never would in the waking world. It would be detrimental to his unending performance.

Though sometimes the idea of creating a fictional America to experience choking the man to death was incredibly tempting. But then one day it might make his control less than perfect and he would experience choking him while awake, which wouldn't be a good look at all.

But even for someone he liked, like North, it wouldn't really be his friend he was dreaming of. It would be a reflection of the way China saw him. And the idea of someone controlling what he said or did would be incredibly violating to the North Korean. Even if there was no way for him to find out, China would never do that to him.

As he walked too far in one direction, the Chinese Countryhuman noted with interest that the world started to smear, becoming glazed and indistinct, like a watercolour. But as he walked back the way he had come, it sharpened, allowing him to see in more detail.

Closer to the dreamer, perhaps? China set off in a new direction, carefully examining his surroundings, and turning around when too many steps would make the buildings start to grow fuzzy again.

He had been under the impression that it was because of the bleary dawn light, but now he realized that actually, none of the city was clear. There was a slight blur over everything, smudging roof tiles into one grey-blue mass and the horizon into a grey and green smear, like someone had put a filter over it.

The environment hadn't been important then. Or the person witnessing it had been too distracted by something at the time. It could also just be uncertain dream logic, but China was certain this was a memory. It felt too heavy to be anything else.

The city was eerily quiet, too quiet for a capital. So when China's sharp hearing picked up a shout from a familiar Japanese voice, it was like the crack of a mortar.

"Find him!"

He picked up his pace a little, turning to the east edge of town, following the sounds of more shouting, his surroundings growing clearer as he went. Though it was obvious there was far more than one person yelling, they all sounded the same, speaking in that monotone that had for one annoying moment raised the hair on the back of his neck. All the words were in the same vein, spoken in the exact same inflection.

"Find him! Catch him! Bring him back! Bring him to Japan!" Even though it was Japan's voice calling out.

China turned the corner to find a section of town that was clearer than ever, and filled with some of his least favourite people- Japanese kempei.

They packed the street like a school of fish, dozens upon dozens of them, dressed in drab uniforms and carrying wickedly sharp, bloodstained tachi, crying out over top of each other in that grating voice.

None of them paid any attention to China as he slipped through the crowd, not even when he reached out, taking one's face in his hands to examine it closer.

Interestingly, they all had the same features. Deep-set slitted eyes that gleamed with stupid malice, thin lips pulled back over teeth that resembled a disorderly cemetery, and a nose and jaw that looked like they had experienced being slammed in a car door a few times too many.

Were they based off of one real, incredibly unfortunate-looking man? Or were they someone's impression of what a Japanese officer looked like?

"Find him!" the man snarled into his face in Japan's eerie monotone.

'I think I will, thank you.'

China tightened his grasp on his head, then wrenched it to the side, cracking his neck. The man dropped like a sack of rice, and actually dissolved into a scattering of rotten grains of the stuff before turning to dust.

Whatever they were, they continued to not react as China killed them. Not all of them, of course. There were far too many, and he was fairly certain that with each one he killed, another took its place.

'Subtle.' Whoever's dream this was could work on their creativity. That, along with 'find him' made China hopeful.

A few streets over, away from the mass of bloodthirsty hollow-men, he stopped in front of two small clapboard houses that had seen better days. He could see the crack that spiderwebbed up one window.

He listened, tuning out the calls of the kempei and tuning in to his surroundings.

A low wheezing noise, the slight scrape of dirt, and a sudden small, wet gasp, like someone was stifling a pant, but desperately needed oxygen.

China took a few steps away from the front houses, looking around for Japanese before stepping in front of the narrow alley that ran between them.

A mound of garbage filled it- rotten straw and food scraps, broken planks of wood, and moldy fabric, leaving barely enough room for someone to squeeze through to the next street. Shaky breathing came from behind it.

"I know you're in there."

Something suddenly lunged over the trash, slamming into China's midsection, scrabbling at him with a fury that was much greater than the actual force it managed to deliver.

*'Aiya, the one time I **don't** want to sneak up on someone, and **this** is what I get for it.'*

The Chinese man sighed, lightly pushing the person attacking him away. They staggered back like he had shoved them, stumbling before catching their balance and suddenly aiming a pistol at him.

"Nice to see you, too," China said politely to his best friend. Or rather, his best friend a good few decades ago, before they had ever met.

A young North stared back at him from the alleyway, equally as filthy and thin as it. His white skin was smeared with mud and dirt, nearly obscuring the taegeuk on his face. His collarbones stuck out like bird bones, heaving above the torn collar of the formerly-white shirt and half-buttoned Japanese jacket he was wearing, both of which were soaked in dried and fresh blood.

"Get the fuck away from me!" he snarled, his voice tight and furious. His white eyes- two of them- rolled wildly in the shadows

of the hood, trying to look at China, the street beyond him and the street behind him at the same time.

China had seen his friend on the verge of a breakdown before, and in the midst of one. He had heard him scream at him in rage born of poorly hidden panic.

But he *had* been trying to hide it. Now he couldn't.

His bony shoulders were hunched up around his head, his eyes gleaming with a desperation that was straining to be anger. He was panting heavily now, a ragged, gurgling sound that said something was wrong inside of him, his thin chest heaving, but unable to reach the apex of the motion before caving, his expression contorting in a pain he usually kept locked away. His chapped lips were pulled back, the motion splitting the scabbed-over cuts that marred them, staining the fangs he bared at China red with his own blood.

He was small, feral, and vicious, like a street cat that had been beaten far too many times. And far from the bearing North aspired to.

"I'm not going back!" he snarled, shaking the pistol in a way that someone who had never held one before would think was threatening, but really would just make disarming him easier. *"I am not.* You'll have to fucking kill me!"

His voice was fervent, but low, wanting to avoid drawing the attention of the Japanese.

China knew without a doubt that if it weren't for the noise it would make, North would have already shot him.

"I don't think we need to be so dramatic," China soothed, pulling his hands from the long sleeves of his robe to be less threatening.

North's eyes shot to them, looking no less tense as he saw they were empty. "Get away from me. *Now."*

"I'm not here to hurt you." China knew words had never been any use at swaying his friend. But right now the only action he could

take to prove them would be to snatch the gun and not turn it on him.

He wouldn't. North disliked being unarmed in the modern day, and it was clear by how tightly he was clutching it that the pistol was the only security he had. Removing it would only reinforce that China was stronger than him, and easily able to harm him, if he wished. Another thing his friend disliked.

"I *said-"* North's words cut off as he coughed, a disgusting noise that wracked his frail body. He tried to stifle it, but kept shaking as more came.

He staggered back, wheezing and choking as he hacked, one hand over his mouth, desperately trying to muffle the sounds as the other unsteadily kept the gun pointed at China. He stumbled on a shard of wood and his legs gave out, sending him to his knees in the dirt as he struggled to stay quiet through the fit, gripping the gun tight as he tried to scramble back, away from China while still coughing.

"It's okay," he murmured, reaching out.

"Don't... touch... *me!"* North choked out between his jagged exhalations, and the desperation in his voice made China draw his hand back.

He wished he hadn't missed Japan in Nanjing. He wished that tanto had gone through his brain like it had been supposed to. He would have been almost twenty years too late to prevent this. But he could have avenged it.

"Ssi-bal," North gasped when the fit had passed, leaving him shaking on his hands and knees, his head bent.

China watched blood and saliva drip from his lips to patter in the dirt.

Media liked to pretend you would spit blood at the slightest inconvenience, but that wasn't true. And while the brighter scarlet could very well be coming from cuts inside of his mouth and throat,

the darker, chunkier stuff mixed in with it came from deeper.

Internal bleeding, possibly ruptured organs, an ankle that wouldn't take his full weight, several gashes on his head, along with bruises mottling his entire face. And the blood soaking through his shirt, under which was surely the wound that would become that thick, raised scar on his chest.

This was North's memory of escaping Japan, leaving his brother behind to go free his country. China hadn't been here when this event had actually happened. North had been by himself. He had somehow dragged himself from Seoul like this, evading capture and going on to gather his provinces and fight a war.

Alone.

China crouched so that he wasn't looming over him, wrapping his arms around his knees. North raised his head warily, wiping the blood from his lips with a shaking hand, his swollen fingers tightening spastically on the gun's grip.

"What do you want?" he rasped.

The words were so familiar that China had to stifle a smile, though he did. He dropped his usual mask completely, opening his eyes, knowing that his friend hated that he kept them squinted like that. It made him look untrustworthy, which was why he did it.

"I want to get you out of here."

He hadn't been there when this had really happened to his friend, just like he hadn't been there in the future when he should have been. Just like no one had been there for China as he haunted the blood-soaked streets of Nanjing.

But China could be here for his friend now.

"...Why?" North asked suspiciously.

"I'm China, if you haven't noticed," China 'introduced' himself.

The Korean's eyes flicked to the five gold stars that crowned his

red head. He likely hadn't seen the flag of the country before, since he didn't question his appearance.

"And don't you think neighbours should help each other out?" the Chinese Countryhuman asked.

His friend's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You won't fool me. China belongs to Japan."

Aiya, had the man told him that? How arrogant. He hadn't invaded China until 1931, let alone owned him.

"China belongs to his people," he corrected lightly. "Do *you* belong to Japan?"

"No!" North snarled, straightening up.

The Chinese man nodded. "There you go. We have a mutual enemy. And I want to help you."

"I don't need... your *help."* North struggled to his feet, bracing himself on the wall of the house as he gasped for air. "We've... never had any help, and I... don't... *need it.* I can do this... *myself."*

His thin legs trembled and he bared his teeth in fury before he went down again, landing on the garbage pile. He half-turned to one side, chest heaving as he scrabbled for purchase in slimy leftovers and moth-eaten fabric, trying to raise himself.

China had to reach for him again, but his friend flinched back, trying to thrash away, and when that failed, curling up in a ball, knees over his stomach and hands protecting his head.

"Don't touch me," he whimpered, eyes squeezed shut as he trembled. "Don't touch me, *please."*

China had never heard North whimper, even when his skin was split open from three years of bombing against his land. And he had barely ever heard him say 'please,' let alone like *that.*

His heart broke.

"I won't." He moved a little distance away from his friend as he finally managed to shove himself up, arms shaking with the effort.

"Stop... *looking* at me," North growled through gritted teeth, trying to be fierce again. "I don't want your... your pity."

He coughed and another chunk of brown blood splattered on his shirt.

"I would never pity you, Chaoxian," China softly assured him, adding what he hadn't said when he had once said that to his friend while awake. "I think you're very brave."

Someone else watching a child struggle like this, or even an adult, wouldn't have been able to help but pity them. But China wouldn't ever do the other country the disservice. He only felt a great sense of affection as North kept struggling, out of the garbage heap and farther from him.

He didn't bother trying to stand again right away, leaning against the wall as he caught his breath, clearly preparing for another attempt, still not giving up even now.

"This is a dream, you know," China said conversationally.

"What?" North seemed shocked from his pain by the statement.

China nodded. "We're in a dream right now. Your dream. This all happened a long time ago."

His friend glared at him in disbelief. "...Are you sick in the head?"

"Maybe," China acknowledged. "But regardless, you are dreaming. You already made it out of here, all on your own."

He knew North wouldn't believe him. He was too rational to. But he also knew there was no way to gain his trust. He was paranoid and felt like the world was against him on the best of days. And back when this was, he had nothing to prove him to the contrary. He didn't even have his provinces. Or brother, any longer.

His friend had always been heavy-mouthed when it came to his

past, and so was his government, likely on his request. The official line was that he had joined in the March First Movement, and before that had been imprisoned by Japan for a nebulous amount of time. North would only ever say that he had been.

China had had to sleuth for the rest, which he had done, since he was incredibly nosy.

Almost nine years from annexation to the March First Movement, which, from what gathered scraps of information and hearsay he had been able to gather, was when North had escaped, with his brother not following for almost two more decades. Almost nine years in a small shack on the grounds of Gyeongbokgung, if his information could be trusted. And by a certain memory of China's, it could be.

Nine years of only he and his brother alone, with everyone around them a foreigner here to colonize their country, and keep them cruelly caged. Of course North would never trust him, no matter what he said or how many chances to kill him China let pass by.

"This isn't a fucking *dream,"* North said tightly. "I can feel pain."

"Memories often hurt," China agreed. "But since you made it out of here on your own before, you don't have to worry about doing it now. I can keep you company this time."

"I don't need company," North hissed, more blood spraying from his mouth. "Especially not a crazy foreigner's."

"But you *do* need to save your people."

His friend's jaw feathered, his white eyes narrowing.

"The way I see it, whether this is a dream or not, you have two options. One-" China raised a finger. "You let me get you out of Seoul sooner, then you can do the rest on your own, or two-" He held up another finger. "You take even longer for no reason, and every minute is another in which Japan tramples your people and gives the Japanese devils time to find you. Which would be fine,

since this is a dream. But if you think it's not, then that could be a problem. So-" He smiled. "What will it be?"

North hesitated, his face contorting in indecision and pain that he still couldn't mask. He would despise that China was seeing him in this state. If he remembered this dream tomorrow, the Chinese country could likely expect at least a year of being frozen out. Perhaps longer.

But it was worth it.

"If I wanted to hurt you or call for the police, I had my opportunity," the Chinese man pointed out. "And I promise I won't try to take your gun from you."

The Japanese voices had grown louder now, only a street over, still with the same monotone refrain. *"Find him! Catch him! Bring him to Japan!"*

North gritted his teeth, then turned to China, his expression hateful. "Fine. Get me out of here."

China stood, not offering to help. His friend braced himself, then slowly but steadily rose until he was standing even with the man's chest.

'So tiny.' China wisely kept the words to himself.

"Can I touch you?" he asked, making no move to. "Carrying you will be faster."

North hesitated, his finger twitching on the trigger of his firearm. Gun safety was apparently a learned skill for him.

His jaw set and he looked at China, nodding once. "Fine."

'Said in the tone of a boy agreeing to his own execution.'

China dipped his head, stepping towards North, who tensed even further, his shoulders hunching. He jittered back as China bent, touching a hand to the ankles exposed by his frayed shorts.

"What are you doing?!" he barked.

China raised a brow. "Carrying you."

"I can... ride on your back," North suggested with distaste. It was good to know he had always been so picky.

"You'll get blood on my robe." China nodded to the red stain spreading on his shirt. "And you'll be able to point your gun at me more easily if you're in my arms."

North shifted gingerly from foot to foot, then made up his mind as another shout echoed, even closer now, looking away.

At the silent consent, China stooped again, sliding one hand under the backs of his knees and the other under his shoulders, carefully lifting him in one smooth motion. Despite his delicate movements, his friend still uttered a small hiss.

'So light.' He was near insubstantial in China's arms, a bundle of sharp sticks held together by scraps. His ribs poked into the Chinese country's sternum like blades as his body twitched and shuddered, trying to escape the contact and press closer at the same time.

"Don't look at me like that," North ordered tightly.

He seemed to not want to face China, but was too on edge to take his eyes off him. His head kept darting from side to side, his hands both white-knuckled clutching his gun on his chest, pointed up at the man.

More blood soaked the front of his shirt as he fidgeted, but it was better than if the hidden wound had been rubbing against China's back. This way it could start to clot.

"Comfortable?" China asked him.

"No."

"Well, I forgot my palanquin, so this will have to do." China smiled at him before wasting no more time, setting off along the alleyway, away from the searching men. It was difficult to tell

without the sun, but once he saw Mount Bugak again, he was able to locate the east side of Seoul, carrying North in that direction.

He wasn't sure if the men would react to his friend where they had ignored him, and didn't care to find out. They weren't real, but to the Korean they were. So he kept out of sight, doubling back or switching streets as they neared them.

The geography, so far normal, if blurry, started to change, shifting as they walked. Walls rose where none had been, forcing them to backtrack. A road that took them east suddenly turned them back west. An alley spat them out onto a thoroughfare filled with soldiers. It was a city as someone unfamiliar with its streets would see it as they were hunted through them.

Every time, China reacted calmly, turning on a heel and walking swiftly away. North shook in his arms, from anger more than fear, baring his teeth at each new obstacle, the gun shifting towards it and away from the man carrying him.

And how had he done this in real life? Dragged himself on unsteady legs from stinking alley to alley? How long had it taken? How many close calls had he had? At least one, if his cloak and weapon were anything to go by.

Had anyone been there to help him at all?

It took dream-hours, but eventually an alley that had been growing narrower and narrower suddenly widened, and they were on a country road, walking past mud huts and farmhouses as they left Seoul behind.

The road was brighter, flanked by fields with new growth sprouting from them, but still blurred, stretching farther into the distance than any route out of Seoul should. Freedom for someone who had never tasted it, and a literal long road ahead, another example of his friend's poor imagination when it came to himself.

North blinked in shock, twisting to look behind them at the city, then back at the endless scenery, eyes wide.

"I'm out." There was such relief and hope in his voice that China had to fight the urge to crush him to his chest.

"I told you I'd get you out," he said, smiling.

North blinked up at him warily, clearing expecting him to deliver him directly into Japan's arms up until the last minute. And perhaps still expecting him to.

"You can put me down now."

"Why don't we get a bit more distance in first?"

North didn't respond, but also didn't struggle, gazing at the city as it somehow loomed over them, despite growing farther away. It felt weighty, like an anchor, making each of China's footsteps want to turn back towards it, despite how badly his friend had wanted out.

It made sense. A part of him was still there, after all.

"You should get some sleep," China advised, and the boy in his arms dragged his gaze away from the city.

"I need to free my people."

"And you can once you wake up," China assured him.

"I can't sleep." North tried to struggle up, but stopped with a gasp of pain. "It's... a waste of time."

The Chinese man sighed. "You really never change."

His friend looked at him warily. "You don't know me."

China smiled down at him. "I know you when you're awake."

The Korean looked away, out at the rolling fields.

"Where do you intend to go?" he asked him.

North paused, then said, "I have provinces. I need to find them."

"You meet Kangwon first," China relayed information that the Provincehuman had once told him. "Would you like to go there? It's the same distance as if you were walking, and I can cover it quicker. You might as well rest."

His friend narrowed his eyes at him, visibly debating if it was a trap. "...Fine," he said after a moment. "But I'm not sleeping. And only take me halfway. I can walk after that."

China would have doubted that, if he didn't know his friend. And if North hadn't already done it. He had made it out of the confusing city and down this endless road somehow. He wished he could hear the story, but knew his friend would never share it. Not when he had been in this state. China could guarantee that he tried not to even think of it, like he did everything else.

"Alright." China kept him steady in his arms as they marched on, using the opportunity to finally examine his friend's face behind the days-old bruises and scabs.

He knew from seeing his brother and photos that North had been around sixteen, physically, at this time. But malnutrition and colonization made him seem even younger, fourteen or less.

His cheekbones were still high and sharp, though it looked like one had been recently shattered. His cheeks were hollow, but would clearly be round if he weren't so emaciated. His features were squished in the way that children's were, making his lips seem slightly pouty and his eyes slightly larger than they were when he became the same age as China.

But he still looked unmistakably like North, down to the little furrow between his brows that was always asking to be smoothed out by a finger.

China nodded to himself. As he suspected, his friend had always been adorable.

North had noticed his gaze, eyeing him warily. "...What?"

This was why China kept his eyes shut now. Part of the reason,

anyway.

"Just comparing you to how you look when you're awake."

The answer was strange enough to turn his friend off of further questioning.

North had been an adult physically as well as chronologically by the time China had met him in person, and it was more difficult to judge with black and white photos. But now he had confirmation that the two Koreas really didn't look that similar, even when they were younger.

He supposed South had been cute, too, in a generic sort of way. He had been even poutier and rounder-eyed than North, and his cheeks had been round, plump from being fed by the Provisional Government. And in the waking world, he was the pretty-boy type, with a delicate face and slim body.

But his eyes had never held the same spark that North's had. Even now, his friend was gazing down that unending road with determination, undaunted by the length, ready to set off down it by himself to free his people from tyranny. It excited China to finally be able to see the face that had frowned down at the letter that had been penned, sending aid from the newly Divided north Korea to the Chinese guerrillas fighting to free their own country. The waxed letter that China kept in his secret room in his house.

It *also* made him want to pinch his friend's cheeks. However, he would resist, and not just because of the bruises that covered them. He might be able to get away with it nowadays, but to the young, injured North, it would only be seen as another patronization after he had spent his entire life being looked down on.

"If this is a dream," North said suddenly, twisting to face him. "If all of this has already happened..." He swallowed. "Did I do it? Did I free my country?"

He clearly still didn't believe the other country. But he couldn't help but ask, and hope that the answer was yes.

China wondered if he would want to hear the truth. That he did free his country from Japan, only to be immediately cut in half by America, plunging he and the brother he had left behind into a three year long hot war that hadn't ended even after all these decades. That his people were being starved by sanctions and menaced by American war games. That he truly was 'North' now.

He would. North hated being kept in the dark, when people knew things that he didn't. Which made his best friend's personality quite unfortunate for him.

China doubted the news would even dishearten him. It would be just another obstacle to bare his pointy little fangs at and overcome.

But it wouldn't comfort him. It would be another step on the long, long road ahead of him. And this was a dream- China wouldn't need to deal with the consequences of lying to him.

"I don't want to ruin the surprise," he said, smiling at his friend, making sure there were no traces of sadness in the set of his eyes. "But yes. You free your country from Japan."

North closed his eyes only briefly. Not relieved, exactly. But glad to hear it.

"And... Do I...?" His friend trailed off, looking over China's arm to the city dragging behind them like an anchor.

"Yes," China said simply. "You see him again."

Rain pouring down around them as a figure lay on the ground, the same red soaking his chest dripping from North's hands. A dozen tense, angry UN sessions, tension crackling over the table. Screaming matches over the phone and in person the few times that South had taken up his brother's offer of open visitation that China had never witnessed, but knew happened.

North took in a shuddering breath, slumping in his arms as he hid his face in his shoulder, and China's heart ached for what had been done to him, and them. All of them.

China hadn't been able to kill Japan. But he would see America

dead. Through economic defeat, waiting for the unstable foundation the Western country sat on to collapse, his gluttonous weight finally too much for the Global South and his own workers to bear, or through the war the American so desperately wanted from him.

For his people, for North's, for all the workers of the world, and for his best friend. China had to win.

He kept walking down the endless spring road toward the indistinct horizon, fighting the pull to return to Seoul, another thing North had been forced to overcome on his own. Despite his friend's stern declaration that he wouldn't sleep, he could tell he was growing tired, the gun resting on his chest and no longer pointed at China. For him to rest around a stranger, his friend knew he had to be truly exhausted. But his eyes kept fluttering open, torn between the horizon, the city, and China's face.

"Who are you to me?" he eventually asked, squinting at him like he could find the answer that way. "Your country took mine as a tributary state. The Countryhumans before us have fought wars against each other. China has no reason to help Korea this way."

"And Korea had no reason to help China when he needed it," China replied, the dirt crunching under his golden sandals. "Beyond that our people share a struggle. And now that we're friends."

"I wouldn't be 'friends' with another country." North gave him a once-over, squinting critically at his red silk robe embroidered with flowers made of gold thread. "Especially someone like *you."*

China supposed he did look like he was wearing an emperor's tribute of gold to someone from 1919 Korea, especially someone who had lived in a box all his life, when the reality was that this was one of his *less* extravagant pajama sets. Honestly, he was glad North had imposed a dress code for the clothing he was allowed to wear in his house. Some of his sleepwear could *not* be worn around someone as young as North was right now.

Or North at his proper age. Which was why the dress code existed.

He could have doubled down and told the other country that they weren't only friends, but best friends and comrades-in-arms. But where was the fun in that? One of China's greatest character flaws was that the closer he was to someone, the greater of a desire he had to terrorize them.

"Ah, you've seen through me," he sighed like he had been caught. "I'm sorry for lying, but I didn't want to frighten you. We're not just neighbours or friends."

North had tensed again, so China had to spring his line quickly.

"We're married."

North's eyes shot open and he sat up in China's arms, clutching his wounded chest and exclaiming, *"What?!"*

"Oh, don't be worried- you're the same age as me in the future," China reassured him, as if suddenly seeing his cause for alarm.

"That's not the problem!" North cried. "We're both men!"

China arched a brow at him. "Did you think the world would stay the same forever?"

His friend gaped at him in wordless dismay, and his expression was so distraught that for once it was incredibly difficult for China to mask his laugh.

He managed to keep his demeanour and deliver with utmost solemnity, "We're actually sleeping in the same bed right now. Why else do you think I would be in your dream?"

North's jaw was still hanging open, his eyes wide, unable to even come up with a comeback. He swiftly turned over, leaving China with only half his face, his expression stricken as he tried to decide whether the man was joking or not.

He had never been able to elicit this level of distress from North in the waking world. He was going to have to try harder, though it would likely be incredibly difficult to top this. Oh well. China enjoyed a challenge.

He wasn't going to come clean. At least now his friend had something to fret over other than his brother and the future of his country.

But even worrying about being a future bride wasn't enough to keep North's eyes open for much longer. They started to slide shut more often, and for longer. With an effort, but less than before, he flipped in China's arms, burying his unblemished face in the silk nightgown.

"Goodnight," China hummed softly.

"I'm not... sleeping," North murmured, his words trailing off as he made himself a liar.

The gun tumbled from his hand, dissolving before it hit the ground, like the blood that had covered him and his clothes, and the cuts and gashes that had marked him. The ribs that pressed into China's arm were more padded now, his weight a little more solid, and the legs in the Chinese man's hands no longer felt like they would snap as North curled them up to his chest, making him shift his hold to cradle him.

He gave the heartfelt sigh of someone whom had never felt the kind touch of a hand finally getting a bit of comfort, a sigh China was sure to never hear when they were both awake.

And China carefully took one of his round bao cheeks between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing gently.

'Victory.'

The pull of the city suddenly released, freeing China's steps. The sky overhead slid to sunset to night to dawn to noon to sunset in the blink of an eye, the returned sun sinking into the earth in a blaze of crimson as the moon travelled high above, clouds scudding across the wheeling stars, moving so fast that light trailed after them, until they winked out, leaving the heavens black. Not a cold, empty shade, but the soft, warm dark of a blanket.

The fields sprouted to full green, then fell away, like the city that

had finally stopped looming behind them. Mountains rose up on either side, then disappeared, vanishing into the darkness, and finally the impossibly distant horizon left, too, leaving only the road, China, and the sleeping boy in his arms.

It was a long march, unending. But China had done long marches before. His footsteps never faltered as he steadily carried his friend onwards to a destination that couldn't be seen.

It didn't matter. China would carry him as long as he had to.

He kept walking as even the road faded, and the rest of his vision, humming lightly to his sleeping friend, weaving the sound into the beat of his heart against China's. He kept walking as the dream drew closed, carrying North on to where he needed to go because even if he could walk the rest of the way on his own, he didn't have to.

Because that was what friends were for.

—

2024

"Good morning."

North managed to not do more than glare as China stepped around the corner at the bottom of his stairs, smiling at him. He was used to it, but *ssi-bal,* he would never understand how the man could be so quiet.

"Have you ever considered sleeping in so I don't have to see you before you leave?" he asked as they started down to the lobby.

"Occasionally," China hummed. "I was tempted to sleep in today. But in the end, I have my priorities."

"Annoying me."

"You're up late, by the way. Your provinces are already drinking bean sprout soup."

North *'tch'*ed. For once in his life, he had also been tempted to sleep in. He had stayed up late with China last night, but he was used to all-nighters, and had only drunk a single can of soju. But for some reason, his futon had felt more comfortable than it usually did. Soft and warm enough that he had woken up curled under the blanket instead of sleeping how he usually did- in a pose that SH referred to as 'military posture' and South Pyongan called 'man suffering from tuberculosis.'

He was getting soft. He would have to wake up before the morning music for the next month to jog until it started.

"Did you have any interesting dreams last night?" China asked abruptly as they descended the third floor stairs.

'Dreams...' For some reason, North almost felt like he had.

But he hadn't had that nightmare in years, and if he had last night, his body wouldn't have been so keen on remaining asleep.

Something tickled at the edge of his mind. Soft fabric and a steady heartbeat under his cheek as a soft voice lightly hummed an oddly familiar tune. A rocking sensation and the feeling of arms around him, holding him securely. Almost like someone was...

North shook his head, scattering the fragments.

"I don't dream," he said bluntly.

"Hmm." China was silent for a few seconds before saying, "Well, *I* had an interesting dream."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Are you sure?" His friend smiled slyly. "You were in it."

"Don't dream about me," North ordered, and his comrade laughed.

"I think I remember you being nice to me in it," he said, teeth flashing. "That's how I know it was a dream."

North shoved him, and he nudged back, the two of them

ricocheting their way downstairs to continue celebrating their joint victory in their Friendship Year together.

Technically this isn't canon, but I guess whether or not it is really depends on what your opinion on dream-walking is. But I think I just wrote this because I was thinking about a future chapter and what they've been through and it made me sad so I wanted to at least pretend someone had been there for them. Ahem. If it is canon, then the reason it happened is because North and China were talking in the dining room while drinking, and they were both quietly really wishing that things between them could be like they used to be, and China wanted to sleep down there with him and North came close to it, but then didn't. So they both went to sleep a bit lonely. And deep down even North wishes someone had been there for him.

Best Friends

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Sorry for posting so much about them. I will not stop.

Close-up of The Creatures.

It's been awhile since I've relayed a strange dream. Does everyone remember the dream where I was a man with a family and I lived in some weird mansion in a empty, grassy area with other mansions and the lights in my house started going off and when they finally all went off me and my family went crazy and I stabbed my wife and child to death, then flashed into *my* body outside where I had to run from the previous me as he tried to murder me with a chainsaw, then I cut his legs off, felt bad for him and cradled his head in my lap while he bled out, but forgot that he wasn't really going to bleed out quickly from his severed ankles so I hit him and ran away again, hearing him thumping behind me on his bloody stumps, then I woke up terrified because my cat was thumping around the house and I thought the leg less man was coming for me? Yes? Good.

So my friend was going to meet her boyfriend's family, but they lived far away (in real life he lives with them) and she couldn't drive for some reason, so my family took her. Mother, father, me, her mother. And her boyfriend's family lived in the empty grassy area from that other dream, full of big, strange, Western-looking mansions. Some were engulfed in ivy, some were made of pure glass, and some had that ugly American chrome look all over. My hackles were up because I recognized it from that dream, including the house 'I' had lived in. But her boyfriend's house looked normal, so I got out of the car with them (thinking that they should be killed because their house was so large). We go inside and it's *huge.* It looked like a lobby with dark walls, a dark carpet, and dark ceiling. There were a bunch of other people there watching us enter. My friend explains that her boyfriend said it was a small party. I take off my shoes, and I wasn't wearing socks (important). I

walk her down the hall to her boyfriend's room, and I meet him and his family. Her boyfriend is her boyfriend from real life, but his parents were white, I think. His dad might have had darker skin, but I just remember his mom was white, with coiffed blonde hair, a pearl necklace, and a lilac, off-the-shoulder dress. Perfect image of a rich American woman. I could sense that she was racist. She gives me strange energy. Curling my friend's hair around her finger, smiling oddly. My mother and her mother come up, and I go talk to them. My father says he'll get my bike from the car (for some reason). He does, then goes outside again because he also hates rich people. More people are entering the mansion. Too many. When I come back, my friend is smiling awkwardly and says the dinner won't be for another week. It's going to be a huge party. I feel strange, so I say, 'Okay, we'll be back then to get you.' I don't want to spend time around rich foreigners, but I don't want to leave yet because the energy is very weird. I decide this place is too fancy to be barefoot and go to get socks from the car. I go back to the lobby. My mother is gone. Friend's mother is gone. My shoes and bike are gone. My father hasn't come back and the dad won't let me leave the house. There are too many people in the house. They're looking at me. I'm wandering around trying to find my shoes. I feel like I need to find my bike to get away. The staff blocks me from going through some side doors that weren't there before. They're all looking at me. I go back to the hallway to find my friend, but the hallway is gone. There's a bunch of doors and a bunch of halls and the floor is starting to slant and stretch oddly. I can't find the lobby anymore. I find a strange shrine of Jesus surrounded by weird right-wing propaganda. At this point I think this is a cult and something bad is going to happen to my friend. I need to find her. I walk into a movie theatre and everyone turns to stare at me, smiling, and I get this feeling that they're trying to act like everything is normal, but they don't know how. The movie is a bunch of disconnected scenes from action movies with no audio. I leave and go into a tiny bathroom and three people are crammed in there holding cigarettes. They grin at me. They aren't smoking. I'm panicking and run out, and then I hear my cat meowing and I see him run around the corner. I get really worried for him and run after, trying to catch him, but then I realize maybe he's leading me to my friend, so I follow him into a backroom and *behind* the house. There are tunnels behind the walls filled with machinery. But before I can go

through them, I wake up because my cat is meowing for food. So he wasn't leading me to my friend, but he *was* leading me out of the dream. Good kitty.

Japans

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Someone wanted more Japan. Here she is. Japan is stuck in samsara, perhaps to force her to atone for her crimes. It hasn't worked yet. So these four Japans are the same Japan, his/her body reformed instead of dissolving and having a new Countryhuman form. He/she keeps unsuccessfully trying to kill his/herself.

He slit his stomach on Okinawa after the surrender, intending to escape the shame of being America's colony. It didn't work, either because of karma or because the first emotion he ever felt was at that moment, and it was hatred.

The bubble economy bursting was his final straw. He waited until the flag change in a attempt to avoid causing any trouble when he killed himself, hoping that a new flag would mean he was replaced by a new Countryhuman. Close! He overdosed on sleeping pills and now he's a nekomimi.

Plots were fomenting between an actually Communist faction of her Communist Party, and Nationalists that were actually Nationalists, and wanted to get rid of America's army over all else. When the whole Y/N debacle happened, North contacted some allies in Japan, wondering if they would be willing to go to war with America, or at least cause enough chaos in Japan to prevent the Americans from using them as a base against Korea. They took a risk and told Japan, but since she's useless, they told her to kill herself to try to create a new Countryhuman. Out of desperation to get away from America (and peer pressure), she slit her own stomach again, slightly hoping that she might just die. So close! You're still a nekomimi.

She won't kill herself again. Most likely.

Miscellaneous Pictures

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Based on that one fake Chainsaw Man panel.

This one.

At least he's self-aware.

I did this one awhile ago, but it's based on that one picture. You know. That one picture. I don't think I can be any clearer.

Hmmm. Lot's of work nightmares lately, which I hate. If I have to be there while I'm awake, I don't want to be there while asleep. I want my Comrade Kim Jong-un dreams. Sigh. I had a dream once where there was a horde of people outside on night shift, and when I went to hide in the back room, they broke in and started crushing me. Their eyes were glowing white. Then a girl in a hijab grabbed me by the shoulders and told me that I had a new god. I don't even have an old god. She wasn't talking about Allah, though, my dream knowledge told me they were being possessed by some eldritch deity. They don't pay me enough for that. 9ve also had a dream where I was working at the station I worked at in Russia during a zombie apocalypse, and me, my cousin, and a girl I knew as a child were fuelling people's vehicles. In the apocalypse. We lived in the store and sold(?) food. I'm not sure if we were charging money. But I ended up getting bit because a customer was being an idiot while I was sweeping the pavement. Even in dreams, customers find ways to spite me.

Maid Dress And Body Types

[image] [image]

As requested. His maid dress is... interpretive. Also I cannot make it less fuzzy.

I can't convey body types by drawing very well, so I'll put them here, along with the types of clothes they like to wear.

North- He's short and compact, with broader shoulders and a narrower waist. If he ate better, he would be a bit stocky. Despite his issues with eating, he doesn't look emaciated at first glance because he works out so much. If you just got a quick glance of him shirtless, you would just think he had a very rangy, muscular build. But looking closer shows how his collarbones, ribs, and hips stick out. If you look even closer, you can see how many scars he has. He also has a slightly crooked jaw.

He only ever wears workshirts when casual, usually black, though SH can get him to wear dark blue to be 'fancier.' He doesn't like loose clothes or tight clothes, so in modern day he has never bought an outfit from the store. SH makes all of his clothes by hand. Though he doesn't mind wearing a suit, he's still more comfortable in a military uniform. Almost always wears military-issue boots.

SH- She's very willowy, with a small chest, slender limbs, and narrow hips. Modern day, she usually only gets a thirty minute jog in, so while she's naturally slender, her muscles aren't as defined as they used to be.

She likes more retro-inspired clothes, from the 70s and 80s. Blouses with round collars or lapels, long, pleated skirts, loose pants (though she prefers skirts). Stripes and spots in black, white, sky blue, and crimson with gold accents. She wears choson-ot semi-casually (in that she always looks for an excuse to wear it). Usually wears sandals or small heels. She didn't use to like heels, but she trained hard to be able to fight in them, so she does now. She

doesn't like wearing make-up because she thinks it sets a bad example for other women. For the same reason, she doesn't wear accessories.

North Hamgyong- Very rectangle-shaped. Broad shoulders and chest, thick torso and legs. Works with machines and vehicles a lot, and hauls stuff for his many jobs, so his upper half is more built than his abdomen. The bustiest of the Northern male provinces.

He likes shirts that don't restrict his arms while working, and pants with room to move. When not working, he likes to wear jackets to cover up the spots of grease and oil on his undershirt. He doesn't like having his sleeves down, but he usually does keep the left one down to cover the scar on that arm. Not a fan of colour, suits, or tight clothes. But he *is* a fan of sturdy work boots.

Hae- She has a fast metabolism, but her time with Japan has set her body on permanent 'we are about to starve to death' mode, so she retains body fat very easily. She's usually chubby because of this, with round cheeks, wide hips, and a soft outer layer. But she gets more practical exercise than most of them on the co-operative farm, so she has a muscular core and broad shoulders. Covered in freckles.

She likes pink. You might already know this. While she likes all bright or pastel colours, every single outfit she wears will have a piece of pink in it, even if it's just a headscarf or wristband. She leans into the farmer aesthetic, and likes clothes that let her roll up her sleeves and get to work easily, while also being cute. Long, loose skirts and pants, shorts, overalls. She likes wearing workshirts because North does (she tried wearing black to match him for a few months, but it didn't suit her). She needs at least two pockets on every outfit, and she likes sandals because they let her shove her toes in the dirt. She really likes make-up, but she is not the best at applying it ('More colour is better!' *bright blue eyeshadow, bright red lipstick, too much mascara, and way too much blush*). North has banned her from wearing it in view of the public because of this. She likes accessories like scarves or hats.

Hwang- Spaghetti noodle. Very tall and thin, with a thin chest and slender shoulders. Long legs and narrow hips. He tries to get his

exercise in, but he mostly just ends up with time for calisthenics or walking in place while reading, so he's not very muscular. He also has a fast metabolism, but unlike Hae, he's not in constant survival mode.

He likes formal clothes to look put-together- trim black pants, white or black workshirt with a brown or black suit jacket and tie, and loafers. Teacher's or politician's attire. But he usually ends up forgetting his suit jacket in the office, getting distracted while putting on his tie, and not noticing that his shirt is untucked. He's a very busy man. His tie is always red to bring to mind the Worker's Party. Never forgets his socks. He likes to carry a handkerchief, pen, and pocketwatch at all times. His glasses are black with a silver chain to hold them on. I like to think he has sock garters.

South Pyongan- She's obsessed with working out and always gets at least an hour in on every normal day. She doesn't have a routine, since she hates routine, but she cycles randomly through cardio, legs, weightlifting, and strengthening exercises, plus does sports. She's not as naturally bulky as North Hamgyong or Chagang, but she has a built-up dancer's build, with firm arm, leg, and core muscles. She has a beauty mark on her chest. The bustiest of the Northern female provinces.

She doesn't like wearing clothes, and loves showing off her muscles, so if it was socially acceptable she would walk around in a sports bra and shorts. But it is not, so she settles for wearing a low-cut undershirt under a jacket to make North and SH paranoid that at any moment she could take it off. She either wears slim pants or sports shorts. She still doesn't really like skirts or dresses, but she does like being trendy. Everyone else mostly gets clothes foisted on them by SH, but South Pyongan begs her to make her the newest styles. She loves jackets with fur, and while she likes her underclothes black, she prefers her overcoats in bright colours that flatter her (not pink or orange). Likes practical boots that look good, or sneakers. She'll wear mascara once and awhile, but whenever she tries to wear make-up, she thinks it looks wrong on her. Likes jewellery, but usually ends up taking it off. Does modelling work for fashion magazines.

North Pyongan- Broad, sloped shoulders, and fairly muscular arms

from rowing boats and fishing. Broad chest and slender waist. He's not the most aggressive about working out, so aside from his arms and chest, he's of average build.

South Pyongan teases him for wearing his summer sailor uniform casually so much, but she doesn't know that the reason he wears it so much is *because* she teases him about it. He does like light, loose clothes, but it's just a coincidence that his uniform matches that description. When he's not wearing it, he'll wear a short-sleeved shirt, usually striped in cool colours and shades, and loose-fitting pants. Prefers sandals. He'll often wear an ascot, and he always wears a hat- a regular flat-brim if he's not wearing his sailor cap.

Ryanggang- broad, stooped shoulders, a stocky build, and thick legs. He usually slumps when he's not at work. He doesn't look very muscular because all of his muscles are practical, so they're more core strength. He has jowls and heavy eye-bags, and is built like a forty year old farmer, despite being physically twenty-fourish.

Contrary to popular belief, most of his clothes are *not* actually brown and grey. SH has filled his wardrobe with colourful clothes. He just prefers muted tones. He likes clothes with a loose cut, though SH and Hwang insist this isn't good for his image. Short or long-sleeved shirts with loose collars, and baggy pants. And sandals.

Kangwon- Stocky and compact, with strong legs. He goes for walks and climbs trees often, so he has good practical muscle. Firm shoulders. Has a few beauty marks on his shoulders and stomach.

He likes earth tones, and green for loose casual clothing. Doesn't like the time it takes to do up buttons, so his pants are usually the kind with strings, and he rarely does his shirt up all the way when he's wearing a workshirt. Prefers pants that don't drag, or long shorts. He's not very comfortable in a suit. He says he likes wearing sandals because he 'feels closer to the earth,' but he definitely just doesn't like wearing shoes.

Chagang- Triangle-shaped, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. He works out more than anyone but South Pyongan (North does too much work to exercise more than him) since as the Supreme Minister of Defence and someone who spends a lot of time with

soldiers, he needs to set a good example. He's very built with defined abs.

He doesn't really have a preference for what he wears, and is comfortable in anything. But since he was wearing a military uniform for most of his early years, he's used to it. And wearing it emphasises Songun policy. Chagang sees himself as a soldier first and everything else second, so he's very rarely ever dressed in anything but a uniform, though which style varies by season and activity. Despite being a general, he often wears an infantry uniform as 'casual wear.' This also connects him more to the rest of the soldiers. Though if you hand him clothes and tell him to wear them out, he will. SH has decided that his colours are black, dark purple, and gold. She does think green suits him, but refuses to make him clothes in it because it's too similar to a uniform. She has also decided that simple, well-fitted shirts and trousers are best for him.

For all of the provinces, they used to be more muscular during the Occupation and the war, since they were living rough and getting practical exercise every day. Also you might have gotten a hint of this, but SH is in charge of most of their wardrobes whether they want it or not. What are you going to do when your cousin says she spent a week making you a shirt? Not wear it? You can try. She will *make* you wear it. North Hamgyong is like 'Fuck off, I don't want your damn clothes.' And she says, 'Then buy more at the store.' And he doesn't, so she makes him another jacket. And he wears it.

South- He has a K-pop boy's body that he has to keep a strict diet to maintain. He does exercises that his management gives him to stay in shape, so he's very slender and toned, with a dancer's body. He actually looks more slender than North with their clothes on, but while his diet is unhealthily strict and he dehydrates himself to keep his muscle lines sharp, he does have more padding on him.

He's very fashion-conscious and has to be wearing what's in style. Not a year out of style, not a year ahead. He needs to be wearing what is popular now, and it needs to be brand name. He likes tight clothes like jeans and shirts because it feels like he's being squeezed, so it's easier not to hug himself or grab his arm when he's nervous. But he's also self-conscious, and wearing tight clothes

without a cover makes him uncomfortable. As an idol, he has to suck it up, but at home he likes to throw on a big hooded sweater over a tight long sleeved shirt. The red and blue-sleeved sweater he has is from his personal fashion line (his name is on it, anyway). The converse he wears are also from it. He likes wearing simple, but expensive jewellery.

North Chungcheong- He goes to the gym daily, and lives by the slogan 'A fascist worked-out today. Have you?' He's also in manual labour. Broad shoulders, broad chest, biceps, strong legs. Bustiest of the male provinces.

He likes tight shirts and tank tops to show off his muscles, and sports shorts or sweatpants. Wears sturdy sneakers or work boots. Likes black and grey, but doesn't really care about fashion, and will wear whatever (until SH gets her hands on him).

South Chuncheong- She will not work out. Her days of sweating are over, thank you very much. She's slender, but compact, only slightly hourglass-shaped. Her spine and shoulders are straight, and she has a beauty mark under her left eye. She's the bustiest of the female provinces, but it's impossible to tell.

She does not wear casual clothes. She only ever wears purple, black, and gold choson-ot, or a black blazer and pencil skirt when practicing law. Sandals or low heels. She will not wear anything as crass as a 'shirt' or 'shorts.' And a proper Korean woman should never wear pants. Not again. The only make-up she uses is a dusting of purple eyeshadow.

Jeju- She's slender and willowy, like SH, but more muscular. She spends a lot of time on Hallasan, haunting the hills, which keeps her fit. She works out. She will be ready.

She prefers to wear garot, in persimmon orange and earth tones. Though she will wear other loose-fitting blouses, sundresses, and skirts, and will add white to her palette when she does. She likes shoes she can escape in, sneakers or sturdy boots.

North Jeolla- A slender hourglass shape and unhealthily skinny. She's a model, so she has a strict diet to follow, and can't work out

too much or too little or it will ruin her figure. Small chest, thin legs and arms, and curved waist.

She likes well-fitted, modern Western-inspired clothes- v-necklines, midriff shirts, tight skirts, off-the-shoulder tops, form-fitting dresses. She wears white with black accents, like chokers or ribbons, and wears heels. For make-up, she uses pink lipgloss, mascara, and eyeliner.

South Jeolla- She has the same build as her sister. They have to keep their weights the same to keep their 'twin model' charm.

She feels more comfortable in a loose shirt and shorts, just casual housewear, but she feels like she has to overcompensate for the rural image that people from the Jeollas are sometimes looked down on for, so she wears the same things as her sister, even around the house. Her colour scheme is black with white accents, like necklaces and belts. She doesn't wear make-up at home.

South Gyeongsang- She's compact and built a bit like an auntie. She has sloped shoulders and thicker legs. She doesn't work out at all, so she's very soft.

She's Catholic so she likes modest clothes, like ankle or knee-length skirts and high-collared blouses with flats. She prefers orange, black, and white. She wears a gold cross necklace, and likes to have a sun-hat to keep her skin fair. Doesn't usually wear make-up.

North Gyeongsang- He's also compact, like his sister, but more muscular. He's a photographer and bug collector, so he's outside running around a lot. His legs are more built than his upper half.

He dresses very casually, usually in shorts or sweatpants with a hooded sweater or long-sleeved shirt. He's clumsy, so doesn't like wearing good clothes. His biggest investment is a good pair of running shoes. He doesn't really care what colour he wears, so long as it's comfortable. Due to breaking so many glasses, he has switched to contact lenses. The glasses he has are the big, round, chunky-rimmed ones.

Gyeonggi- As an idol and actor he needs to be conscious of his

image, but he's not very good at dieting or exercising. As such, his fans often praise him for having a more realistic body type with a bit of 'chub' (literally just not being dehydrated skinny). This distresses him greatly, so for a month or two he'll have abs before he loses motivation again. It's a vicious cycle. His unmodified body type is average weight, but shorter than average height.

He loves fashion, and likes to experiment. Some of his favourite things to wear are sleeveless turtlenecks and oversized hooded sweaters that he wears off the shoulders. He likes baggy pants and sneakers, and wears lots of belts and chains. He also wears a fake bandage on his face. He'll wear any colours and can usually pull the weird combinations off, though he likes more energetic ones.

Gangwon- He's built like Kangwon- stocky and compact- but skinnier. He has trouble eating when he's nervous, and he's pretty much always nervous. He likes being outdoors, but isn't as active as Kangwon, so he's healthy, but not too fit, though he does try to work out daily.

He likes cardigans and knitted sweaters in muted colours to avoid drawing attention. He also doesn't like buttons, so wears string-tied pants, and shares Kangwon's dislike of shoes, though he usually wears slippers instead.

Korea- Built more like North, more stocky, like he should have been, but with less muscle, since it hasn't been used practically as much. He works out intensely until he can match North's levels more. His hipbones and collarbones still stick out. Goes through periods of intense discomfort with his body brought on by a combination of hating that he isn't as muscular as North, that he isn't as slender as South, that he isn't as emaciated as North.

Sticks to North's style. Sometimes wants to wear tight clothes like South would have, but they usually end up making him feel trapped and he has to tear them off. He hates it, but he usually ends up casually rolling up his sleeve or popping his collar like South would have.

China- He is, as North says, very long. He has a long torso and long legs. There is also something sinuous about him. He looks almost

curvy, but is more of a slender triangle shape, the type to look more muscular with his clothes off. He used to be very fit, but doesn't work out as much now, though he does try to get some exercise every day. So he only has light muscle in the modern day.

In the past, China wore zhongshan in darker colours, usually dark green, and they were always made out of cotton or other more durable materials. Matching pants and military boots. Modern day, he wears long changshan/qipao, which are usually in bright red and embroidered with gold. But he does have a very diverse wardrobe. Think of those Chinese street fashion videos, and he would probably wear any outfit in those. But it has to be silk. It's unknown which of these styles he prefers. He'll also wear different ethnic traditional wear. The one unifying feature is that all of his sleeves are very long, even on his undershirts. Hordes jewellery, but doesn't wear it (clink clink is not good for stealth).

Russia- He's muscular, but in a gopnik type way. So not healthy. He has a broad chest and arms because he lifts weights, and thick thighs from squatting, but his stomach is sort of soft. You can see his ribs. It's the sunflower seed and cigarette diet.

He will wear whatever and doesn't go clothes shopping much. He prefers loose pants and tank tops, since he overheats easily. Owns an insane amount of identical Adidas sweaters and shoes. And Adibas. No one is quite sure why he wears off-brand when he is rich. Was he scammed? Doesn't like formal clothes. CCCP gave him his ushanka, which is why he wears it almost everywhere.

Krim- She is twelve so she is built like a stick.

She likes sailor-style dresses and ribbons, and the colours blue and white. Russia dresses her in the Young Pioneers outfit CCCP used to dress them in. No make-up, 'she is twelve, blin.'

Nipponia- Pixie build. She has short legs, short torso, a flat chest, and no hips. She's a bit more muscular as a Socialist Republic, but it's lean muscle, like a panther. She's only self-conscious about her build when someone mentions it.

She wears anything 'cute.' Her definition of cute changes daily.

Constants are shorts and chokers ('It is *not* a collar, I am *not* a cat'). Doesn't like tight pants or revealing shirts, and will not wear a school uniform. The only make-up she uses is lipgloss. She usually eats it all off, though.

CCCP- In the beginning of both his incarnations, he's very muscular. Broad chest, arms, legs, defined abdomen. But in both cases as he moves away from war, he gets a Slav dad build. Still with big arms and chest, but also a softer stomach. For some of you this will be a win, and for some, a loss. The bustiest of the entire group.

He likes warm, covering shirts, and owns plenty of turtlenecks. He knits most of his sweaters. Not very comfortable in formal clothes. Likes thicker, heavier fabrics. Doesn't wear much colour. The brown coat was a gift from Lenin, so he almost always wears it. The ushanka was a gift from Stalin, and he continues to wear it to reject 'DeStalinization' (die Khruzhev die). He really just wants to wear slippers and sweaters all the time. Born to be a stay at home father, forced to be a revolutionary and politician.

Ukraina- Not exactly busty, but curvy. She has a stout hourglass shape, with not much muscle. She has broad shoulders and wide hips.

Likes loose, flowy clothes, like blouses and skirts. Wears white and blue with gold or red accents usually. Likes elaborate jewellery. Wears eyeliner and lipstick, usually red. Almost always wears a flower crown with real flowers (but she has a fake one for when she's lazy).

Canada- Very tall and thin. The awkward way he carries himself, combined with his stick-like frame make him look more gaunt than he is. He's actually pretty muscular, especially his arms and legs.

Wears plaid and camouflage. You might think he's wearing the same shirt and sweater every day, but actually there are subtle differences in the patterns. So he says. He gets cold easily, so he almost always has a sweater with him, along with warm boots. His raccoon hat is one he made himself back during the pioneer days. Don't smell it.

UIP- He's stocky, with broader shoulders and stouter legs. An average weight, not overly muscular, fat, or skinny. Has a slightly strange walking gait from his combined muscle memories.

Doesn't like wearing black suits, since it makes him think of Israel. Tries to emulate Palestine's style as much as possible, so looser clothes usually in solid, neutral colours, and with sandals. One side of his collar usually ends up flipped, just like one sleeve gets rolled up. But unlike how Korea does it unconsciously, he is consciously trying to annoy himself. Wears a red and white keffiyeh.

America- His weight fluctuates drastically. He's the type to never stick to a routine and do what he wants when he wants to. So he'll binge eat for weeks, get pudgy, then get on a work out kick and have peak physical physique for a few months. His usual frame (and the one he has in Chasing Liberty, since he used to mostly just be muscular) is broad shoulders, strong legs, rippling abs, and a triangle-shaped torso. The 'all-American male' build.

He used to wear a military uniform all the time, but has transitioned from soldier to suit. He usually 'chameleons' with his outfits- uniform when taking to military folks, suit when with businessmen or politicians, blue tie with Democrats, red tie with Republicans, and so on. Casually, he usually wears a tank top and army pants or jeans when in his muscular phase, with a varsity jacket over top in his chubbier phase. His personal style is somewhat stuck in the fictionalized version of the American 50s. 'The good ole days.' Wears jewellery, but only when chameleoning.

Biting

[image] [image]

[image]

In another bold move, I give North my character trait of wanting to chew on my friends. The real reason China wears high collars all the time (actually he probably wants to be chewed on).

Slightly related, I think China is the type that can easily put away three bowls of noodles, various dim sum, and half a roast duck without being full or gaining weight. But North would absolutely not believe this. China doesn't like to take his friend's food, and he knows how North feels about gluttons, so he's always eaten conservatively in front of him. North 100% thinks China has a small appetite, while Russia is like '? I once saw him eat eight chebureki, two bowls of borsch, a pitcher of kompot, and he was still able to able to have a slice of medovik after.'

Also the new JFK assassination files revealing that the Hungarian riots in 1956 were orchestrated by the CIA, who also sponsored anti-Communist groups in Cuba in an attempt to turn them both into American puppets, and also had plans to spray chemicals on Cuba to make their crops fail, and also has tons of secret areas worldwide, in most of their puppets' capitals (Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Manila, Melbourne, etcetera and etcetera). Wow! 'Tankies' were right again. Shocked.

Anyway I had a dream that I was a white American man travelling down a very long driveway with a group of friends and my girlfriend to meet her psychotic father (her words, not mine, she said he had shot and killed people before; plus he had 'no minorities' signs up). One of our friends was black, so I'm not sure how she expected that to go. Ten minutes of driving down this

driveway, she sent me back to the other truck to grab her phone charger, so I took the black friend (none of us had names) with me. We walk back over this huge driveway, until a white van pulls up from an offshoot of it *(really* big driveway). He asked if we could keep him company. He gave us weird vibes, but we got in. He had a name and it was Ryunosuke. He was friendly, and he drove us to the end of the driveway, got out, and asked if we could walk him off the property. We did. He smiled at us and walked into the town. We turned around and his van was gone. Okay. So we grabbed the charger from our other car and started to walk back. This driveway was *long.* It went through rolling fields and deep forests, and there were crumbling ruins all over it, with a bunch of different languages on them. I have no idea what my girlfriend wanted from us because it was literally going to take a day to walk down it, I think. I got this unnerving feeling that the driveway would never end, and even if it did, it was too late for my girlfriend and our other friends. As we walked, we started to hear distant howls rising from the trees as the sun set, and up ahead we could see a woman walking two huge dogs. We were scared of them, but then these distorted wolf creatures shot out of the forest and started to savage them. Me and my friend ran in and beat them off, sending them back to the trees, and the woman thanked us, asking if we could escort her and her injured dogs off the property. It was going to be another hour back, probably, but we said yes, obviously. I started to wake up as we neared the end of the driveway, and I had enlightenment beamed into me. Ryunosuke and the woman were the spirits of people who had died on the driveway. Ryunosuke was a lost deliveryman (the white van had been murdered by my girlfriend's father for being Japanese, while the woman had been walking her dogs and been attacked by the 'wolves,' and since we hadn't been there, she and her dogs had died. Me and my friend were intervening in their eternal torture and freeing them from the driveway. I woke up with this heavy melancholy that we wouldn't be able to save all the other souls, including the rest of our friends waiting for us at the end. Whatever that means.

South Chungcheong <3

[image]

[image]

Comrade Bitch herself <3 She is the same no matter where she is. I need to do character sheets for all the Southern provinces (and the other countries), but here's some facts about her: She's definitely involved in the 4B movement and probably has an online account to convince women to join it (she doesn't even have to shave her head). She's a lawyer that loves taking cases against politicians pro-bono (usually to piss off South). She definitely hates that she has English letters on her Southern flag. She hates women, but she's a feminist because she hates men more. She does work with groups to seek reparations for former comfort women. Every time she entered the same room as Yoon Suk-yeol, South was forced to move him elsewhere. 'Mister Yoon! I, uh, need to talk to you. Far away from here. Right now.' *hurriedly pushing him away as South Chungcheong bears down on them* When World War III broke out, she had a group of soldiers loyal to her seize an American military base and passed information to North. No one but Korea knows about this. With Korea Reunified, she takes cases for women involved in domestic or sexual abuse. No more cases against politicians, and strangely, while Korea nags her to study so she can join the Worker's Party, he doesn't seem as insistent as with the others, and for some reason seems to tolerate her being 'useless.' In reality, he has her working to sniff out corruption in the Party and State. Anyone can take a case against a corrupt politician. Not everyone can lure them out of hiding.
I wrote out a future Interlude chapter for her, and I feel like I understand her better now. She's like SH if SH chose hate, and SH is like South Chungcheong if South Chungcheong chose love. They never stop despising each other.

Also there is a vial of cat pee in my fridge right now. The things the vets ask you to do are arduous.

More Miscellany

[image] [image]

[image]

[image]

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These are all based off of pins on 4shiro's Pinterest boards for the characters (hope it's okay to mention you).

Statement.

Proof.

POV: You are South Pyongan.

Average day in South's life.

It was fun making these hehe.

I think I'm going to the city soon. If any of you have any recipes from your country that I should try making, recommend them here. I want to try making something new. It's okay if you don't think Japan would have the ingredients. So long as they're reasonable, I will find substitutions. I am the substitution Generalissimo. For example, most ingredients in a cake can be replaced with mayonez.

China's Rom-Com

[image] [image]

North and China in Seoul. Another one from 4shiro's pinterest (thank youuu) ^^

I did do an outline for the guns. Please look at a picture of a Type 49 and Type 50 (almost identical) and then don't blame me.

This *is* a joke, by the way. Even if China was in love with North, he wouldn't be in love with him *yet.* Not for awhile. Not that he is. I like to keep it ambiguous. You can consider them as just really close friends, both of whom don't really have normal personalities. North is the sort to not want to be attached to anyone besides his people, but when someone actually manages to make it past his defenses, he gets *very* attached to them (his provinces, China, Y/N). He's never had 'normal' relationships, since he was isolated with South for so many years. Intense, crushing devotion and self-sacrifice are all he knows (which is why he doesn't like getting attached to people; that's supposed to be reserved for his brother and his people (and later he accepts- his provinces; anything else makes him feel guilty). And China is a obsessive person who latches onto people that he finds interesting and doesn't let go. And North is one of the two most interesting people he's ever met (the other being Mao Zedong). He doesn't have halfway feelings. He either hates people, loves them, or is completely neutral. Plus he's naturally... like *that.* That's why their friendship is so intimate.
But you could also read them as having romantic feelings for each other. North is asexual and doesn't even think about romance, let alone even the existence of gay people, so it would make sense for him to be like 'This is just what friendship feels like.' (to be clear, he would DEFINITELY not be feeling that yet in CL) I think China (especially in the past) is the type of person to think things like 'It's perfectly natural to find women and men equally attractive. But a man being *in love* with another man? Mm. *slightly disgusted eyebrow raise*' He would be the type to be like *'Your* love for another man is disgusting and degenerate. However, *mine* is pure

and wholesome.' Modern-day, he's not exactly homophobic, he's just kind of a bastard. You could consider that he's in love with North, but he doesn't tell him because he knows it would unsettle North. It would disgust him. He's not homophobic at all, but anyone liking him makes him uncomfortable. Culturally, it being a man would make him even more uncomfortable. Plus, China knows it would make him paranoid. 'Is that why he's helped me all these years? Because he wants to sleep with me? Because he wants something from me? It has to be. I knew it.' North is already suspicious of why he stays by him, and why he came back after his absence. He would never believe China was actually in love with him, and would be set on 'He wants something and he always gets what he wants. I'm just another conquest for him.' It would make him lash out and sever their friendship. And China would never let that happen. Even if he was in love with North, he would accept that they could never be together. Not only are their cultures still more socially conservative when it comes to sexuality, but North's autonomy and pride are very important to him and his people. He already gets accused of being China's dog or puppet. If it was known they were in a relationship, foreign papers would start churning out articles that claimed he was whoring himself out to China in exchange for trade and economic help. It wouldn't be enough for him to know that wasn't true. It would be another degradation on top of the thousands he already has to put up with. Plus if his people thought that, or considered it as a form of colonialism or selling out, it would be the worst thing possible to him. It would destroy his reputation and their trust in him (even if it didn't, he would *think* it did). Even as Korea, there would still be the scandal and rumours. America wasn't the only person making up lies about him. And it could seem like they were just being open about it now. He would never be comfortable knowing that some people could think he had been essentially selling himself to China in the past, even if he wasn't. He also wouldn't like to think that people saw China that way. China is the 'well, *we* know the truth' type, but he also has a reputation and role that are crucial to him, and would hate to do that to his friend. Because in the end, even if he is in love with North, that's only a pleasant feeling on the side. It's his to enjoy, and doesn't need to be shared. Because the most important thing to him is their friendship. Even if they were lovers, 'friend' would still be North's most important title to him.

I really like when characters have a deep platonic bond, and I don't really like when it can get reduced to 'they're just in love.' Just to be clear, it doesn't bother me when you guys say they should kiss and get married, or say that they're in love. I think it's funny, and I'm also purposefully leaving that interpretation open. Keep it up. It's just important to me that you know China would do everything he does for North whether or not he was in love with him, because he is his best friend. He loves him. And North loves him back and wishes he could do more for him (local self-sacrificer cannot self-sacrifice for the guy who has everything; paralyzed by guilt and confusion) because he's *his* best friend. Even if they were also in love. They are both prideful, stubborn, flawed, emotionally-challenged men that could never be together romantically because of both who they are as people and who they are as Countryhumans. But they *are* best friends and they *do* love each other. That's all!

Hongdae Guy

[image] [image]

South lives his life trying to be what he wants so desperately to be- confident, charismatic, loved. Like America. Or North. He never gets over wishing he had his brother's way with people, even when he has celebrities, rich people, and normal people all over the country (and in foreign countries) fawning over him. Even when more people 'love' him than his brother. He's charming, fun, and friendly where North is hard, 'uncaring,' and a buzzkill. The world sees him as someone popular and admirable, and they see his brother as dangerous and unhinged. But it still isn't enough. He knows it isn't the same. And he can't ever feel like they love *him*- they love who he pretends to be. And *he* doesn't entirely like who he pretends to be. He lives life feeling like he's wearing a mask. But it's not one he can take off. If he did, he thinks people would go back to hating him. And he doesn't really remember who he would be if he wasn't this. Someone small and scared and alone. China- as someone who is also constantly acting- recognizes this, and probably makes jabs about it. 'If you are the mask, then there isn't really anything underneath it.'

This is all to say, I think South would do idol things or try and mimic 'Hongdae guys' (or America), then immediately want to die of cringe after, even if it succeeded. Lying in bed with a woman, staring at the ceiling thinking, 'How did that work? She should have stabbed me with her heel.' (also him saying that isn't as menacing as it seems; it's more of a pick-up line- 'do you live alone' = 'Can we go back to your place?')

Today my friend complained of feeling sick. Dizzy, shaky, fever. We spent an hour of her asking if she should go to the hospital. When she mentioned her eyelids were white inside, I asked if maybe she had anemia. Her eyes lit up. 'Ohhhh. Right. I have anemia. I'm

supposed to be eating iron pills.' Ah. That could be the problem.

North And Russia

[image] [image]

The boysssssss! This is based off of this picture that my cousin sent me (she knows who I am as a person). North and his definitely-not little brother with static in his head.

North desperately wants to feel like he has zero responsibility for Russia, but unfortunately he's ingrained in his head as a little boy that can't stop tripping over his own feet, and has to push his ushanka out of his eyes. He's even colder with him than with China, in an effort to keep this 'kid' at arm's length. He tries to enforce that all of their interactions are transactional. 'I trade with you because I need partners that will skirt the sanctions. I signed this defense pact with you because I need allies when America and South make their move. I allow you to sleep over and drive you around in my car to get you to sleep and let you call me when you're having an episode to strengthen diplomatic relations. *Not* because I care about you.' It doesn't bother Russia. He knows he's just like that (CCCP told him). North has good luck in that his closest comrades have been depressed/patient/strange enough that his attitude doesn't deter them at all. Out loud he would say this this isn't good luck, and is actually the opposite.
Russia sees North as this connection to his father and a happier past. He's still pursuing their ideals, unclouded by any of China's capitalist act. When he's driving around the DPRK with him he can pretend he's still a kid and when they get back to the high-rise, CCCP will carry him up to bed while he pretends to sleep. Part of the reason why North is so harsh with Russia is because he really does feel like his little brother to him. And he doesn't want any other brother than the one he already has. He's already so distant from South that it scares him when he finds himself thinking Russia is the closest thing he has to a brother.

This is a specific gripe, but I hate seeing Countryhumans fans that have a propagandized view of the DPRK and parrot CIA/NIS talking points in their characterization of it. 'oh, he's locked up by the evil

Kim family and the Communist regime, but he really just wants Freedom and Democracy (tm)' or 'evil scary leader of a Communist 'regime' that starves people and wants to blow up the world.' And then they say that the official name of the country is 북한 (Bukhan). It's not. That's the *South* Korean name. The *North* Korean name (hence the official name since its *their* country) is 조선 (Choseon). These people wouldn't say the official name of South Korea is 남조선 (Namchoseon). Because it isn't. It's 한국 (Hanguk). Namchoseon is what the North calls it. It's like ooooooohhhhh. So you actually don't know anything at all. You've sucked up Radio Free Asia articles and seen a couple Yeon-mi Park videos then googled 'Korean name for North Korea' and copy pasted the first thing that came up. I think if you don't even know the name of a country you shouldn't be allowed to act like you know anything about their politics. 'No investigation, no right to speak' and such. (Obviously this doesn't apply to South Koreans calling it Bukhan, since that is their name for it, and also considering how touchy their National Intelligence Service is (guy getting imprisoned for poem praising the North as an example) there is a chance they could get marked for it, even just for saying the official North Korean name is Choseon. Unlikely, but not impossible.) There's a reason I don't really read other Countryhumans fanfiction unless it's translated from Mandarin. I'm incredibly confrontational so I know I'll just be rattling my own cage.

Mermaid North

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

I imagine North reluctantly saved China from 'drowning' during a storm (China threw himself in trying to attract the mercreature he was fairly certain lived near there). He just threatens to drown him to try and scare him off after he comes sniffing around the cove for him. But China probably *is* actually attempting to steal his slime to sell to people. North has an eel-like tail, so he's slippery slimey. I imagine South would have flowy, colourful fins with lots of bioluminescent spots.
If you're wondering what China is doing with his shirt, it's that thing Chinese uncles do where they roll it up to their chest to stay cool.

I had a dream last night where I was hunting through an enormous apartment bloc for a monster made out of uncooked bread dough. People had been disappearing in the depths of the bloc (it had outside areas, don't question it), and I was convinced there was something doing it. There was this unnerving part where I was searching for this missing woman with my friend, her dog (that doesn't exist), and the woman's family. Eventually they gave up, and we were about to leave when I heard this sound like raw dough being thrown to the floor. I turned around, tense, waiting, but then my friend's dog ran off, so we had to follow it. As we shut this evelvator door behind us, I heard something slam against it, and I got a cinematic view of this fleshy, doughy, yellowish thing slopping up against it. We ended up having to go to this apartment at the top of the bloc that was basically a mansion because this rich man said he found her dog. Her boyfriend said he knew him, and gave us this code to get in, and one to get out. We get in, the man is

waiting for us on a balcony, and he points and says her dog is 'in there,' and points to this hole in a countertop. I'm on edge, thinking about those sinks that have blades in them, and because I don't trust rich people. My friend hesitantly reaches her hand in, and comes out with her dog's leash. We both started screaming at the top of our lungs, I think because we were both convinced her dog had been blended. But then the guy said, 'Behind you,' and we realized the leash led out of the cupboard under the hole and into another room. Her dog came out, completely fine. I don't know why we had to do the hole thing. I think he was purposefully trying to terrorize us. He gave me bad vibes. So we go to leave, and we have to walk through this nightclub in his apartment (this bloc was huge). We force our way through the crowd, and my friend is begging to stay. I told her I needed to leave because there was a dough monster terrorizing our home and I needed to destroy it before it could hurt anyone else. My friend (like everyone else) sighed and told me I was crazy. Doing that to me in my own dream should be illegal, I think. So in order to leave this man's apartment we have to put the exit code into this small safe thing. But my friend says she forgets the code. I never knew it. I tell her to call her boyfriend. She says she doesn't want to make him mad. I think she just doesn't want to leave. She suggests going back to the rich guy. I say no because I get this feeling something awful will happen to us if we do. I ask the door woman if we can wait for someone else to put a code in and leave with them. She says no, each code only lets its assigned people leave. Come on guys, I have a dough monster to hunt. People are dying. Next thing I know, we're standing in a field, me, my friend, her dog, and another dog in a cowboy hat with a revolver. He's standing on two legs and trying to shoot my friend's dog. He's also speaking. I tackle him, wrest the gun away and blow his brains out. My friend freaks out, I freak out because we're still in the rich guys apartment (open field, don't question it) and we just killed his talking dog-sheriff. I shove his body in a ditch and we fast-walk away, back towards the white hallway that leads back to the club part. A police car rolls up and I'm fiercely telling my friend to act natural and say nothing. Two policemen (literally just TMPD men) swagger towards us and tell us we've wandered into a restricted area. I start playing dumb, fluttering my lashes and twirling my hair. I know he knows we killed that dog. He starts to lead us away (possibly back to the rich man), and then I woke up. I

can't reinforce enough that during this entire dream I was single-mindedly focused on hunting this dough monster. Everything else was just a side quest. I was carrying a spear for all of it, ready to kill. And I didn't even get to do it. It's still out there, haunting the halls of my mind.

Kitchen Crimes

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

I promised I would draw SH based on this before, so here you go!

Time for another unsettling dream!

I was visiting 'my farm' (I have never lived on a farm), at night, and decided to head to the barn first, which was at the back of the property. As I walked, I looked up at the moon, which was covered by clouds. When I got there, I found my mother lying on the ground asleep next to a dead cow, and a horse that had a cut on his leg. There was a tablet nearby that I picked up and found videos on. My mother (who knows nothing about animals in real life) had been giving the cow an abortion, but halfway through, she noticed the fetus looked... strange. She was laying the bones out on the ground. They were oddly shaped, and the skull was round and covered with this grey-red membrane, with a mouthful of fangs. In the present, it was nowhere to be seen. In the video, mother said she had been doing this for years, and never seen anything like it. She said she knew something was wrong. I turned off the tablet and woke her up. The horse was breathing heavily, with saliva dropping from its mouth, and the cut on its knee was rotting. It kept getting too close, shoving its head in between us, just breathing raggedly. My mother had a cane (she doesn't?), so I helped her up, and asked what happened. She was sort of dazed, so I told her I would get her to the house. Then she suddenly went strangely aggressive, and started asking why I was there. I told her I had just wanted to see the barn cats before I went to sleep, and she calmed down. I then realized that I didn't see any cats, and that the barn was strangely quiet. And dark. The horse stared and panted as we left, its eyes blown wide. I asked mother if we would have to put it down, and she said yes. She didn't know what happened to it, or the cow. It had been alive when she went to sleep. As we go to the house, I look up and see the moon is still in the same place with the same clouds over it, unmoving. Mother looks up, too, and says 'The moon hasn't moved.'

I was trying to pretend nothing was wrong, so I told her it must have got 'caught on something.' Then I quickly said the clouds were just moving with it. Mother kept staring, and said, 'I think the world is changing.' We get to the house, where I know father is sleeping. But just as we're about to go in, I look to the side and see something in the distant sky. A pinpoint of light and this beautiful glowing ring, like a galaxy made of golden light. I stop and point it out to mother. It's plummeting towards the ground a million miles away, and I can't look away. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Then it shifts, like it curved towards the ground, speeding closer. 'It's a missile. And it's coming towards-' And then it struck my house and incinerated it in this burst of heat, along with mother. Even though she was right in front of me, I was alive. 'Our house.' This rush of fear and despair filled me, and I knew that another missile was coming to eliminate me. Then I woke up shaking and crying, but it wasn't because I was sad or scared. I was just thinking it was a weird dream. But I had tears pouring down my face. For an hour I was filled with fight or flight instinct and had to hug my cat. Please send me more Kim Jong-un dreams, not whatever that was.

Pride Month And Origins

[image]

I've been thinking about this since last year. I have shown great restraint by waiting this long. And now incoherent world-building rambling.

I was thinking about what the origin of Countryhumans would be in a world where they existed. I think in the olden days, there wouldn't be much thought put to it, since they would either be seen as gods, spirits, or as created by gods (as an example, the first Japan being created by Izanagi and Izanami). And what mortal questions a god's existence? But in more modern days as science rises and Countryhumans start to be seen less as divine and more as a phenomenon, scientists and naturalists would start to question and look into it. No one would really know, just like how we don't have all of humanity's evolution mapped out, but there would be lots of theories. Like once Pangea is proposed and confirmed, there would be a theory that the first Countryhuman was Pangea as a sort of Mother Earth. But when it's discovered that Antarctica doesn't have a representation, it would be mostly accepted that Countryhumans don't represent land, but people, and since no homimids lived on Pangea, that would be scrapped, though some fringe theorists would still believe it. Also the reason the UN has a representation but other organizations don't (ASEAN, BRICS, NATO, etc.) is because they don't have their own land, they're just made up of countries. The UN has its own ground since its headquarters is on neutral ground that doesn't technically belong to America (though the UN pretty much does).
I think the search for the 'first Countryhuman' would be incredibly difficult, since most historical Countryhuman's records and such wouldn't be much use. It lessens their power if they're not made by god, or god, or the first of their country. I think in older days, even succession records would be difficult. There would be revelations every once and awhile that some Greek or Egyptian Countryhuman wasn't actually the same person as the one that came before them,

even though they pretended to be, and it would shake the historical community, select people from those countries and literally no one else, like most discoveries.
There would be some old, old cave painting and historians would be like 'The first record of a Countryhuman!' and some freak would be like, 'Are you dumb?? That's clearly an alien,' and it would do numbers in the alien community. Some (enlightened) people would see them and be like 'It *is* a Countryhuman, but Countryhumans were *made* by aliens to guide their experiments- humans- to their full potential.' (me, me, I would say that). I'm not saying that's canon, but I am saying if I lived in that world I would believe that.
But Countryhumans would be even older than that. I like the idea that the first Countryhuman was born alongside the first homimid that could be considered 'human,' even if it ended up being one of the ones in a dead evolutionary branch that didn't lead directly to us. Evolution isn't an all of a sudden thing. But at one point there would have been a child that was born just different enough to be 'human.' Do you think the first human was loved? Or do you think it was different enough to be considered aberrant and left to die? Did the not-quite-human mother have enough capacity for 'human' thinking to shun it, or did she love her strange-looking son whose mind worked in ways she could never quite comprehend in the way that a cat loves it's three-legged kitten? If your child was something new, would you love it?
Anyways, I like to think the first 'Country'human would have been formed at the same time as the child. You could suppose that the child was left to die, and she raised it, but I believe in love that crosses evolutionary lines, so I think the child was loved and so was she. Maybe its group chased her away at first, since she was so different, but she stuck around and left them meat and food as offerings. I like the idea of the reversal of most Countryhuman creation myths painting them as gods that received tribute, but the first exchange was the other way around. Maybe one day she saved the child from a big cat, and the tribe accepted her in. While she wouldn't have any knowledge that 'humans' didn't, she would be similar to the child in that they would be the ones driven to invent tools. Labour invented humanity, so I think the first 'human' to form a Countryhuman would be of the first genus that truly used tools in a non-rudimentary way. They wouldn't be able to communicate with each other verbally, since tool use was around before proper

speech, but in a way they would be the only ones to understand each other. I think as more 'Country'humans came to be, they would represent more different evolutionary branches of homimids, and eventually when some would split off from groups to form new ones, it would create a new 'Country'human with them, and they would spread out of Africa or Asia and across the world just like their people. One day the first child would die, and the first 'Country'human would remain to look after his child and the other changing children. And one day they would change so much that they were no longer hers, and she would dissolve and be replaced by one with a quicker mind and cleverer hands.
But no one in modern day would know anything about this. It would all be theories stemming from cave paintings. Countryhumans don't leave bones, after all.

Provinces Of South Korea

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Finally, South's provinces! If you read Chasing Liberty, you know they were North's provinces first. They fought with him in the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army, and were all Communists at one point (not South Chungcheong). During the war, most of them are with the KPA on the way to Busan (not South Chungcheong or Jeju). After being reclaimed by South, they spend the entire war basically imprisoned, and after it they're under close supervision by Rhee's government, since they worked with North. They're told that Taejon, Jeju, Nogun-ri, and many more massacres are the responsibility of the Communists, even though many of them were there and know it's not true. Pak Chung-hee, Choi Kyu-ha, and Chun Du-hwan keep this tradition up. They're not allowed to participate in politics or meet-up privately. Ro Tae-woo gives them a bit more freedom, fitting with South Korea's first 'democracy,' but intensifies efforts to re-educate them. They all hate him for his role in crushing the Gwangju Uprising years earlier, as well as for helping cover up the Jeju Island massacres, and the time the South Korean government rounded up homeless people and put them in camps for the Olympics (South Chungcheong doesn't really care about that part). It wasn't until Kim Young-sam in 1993 that they were given full freedom- getting rid of their supervision, allowing them to move and meet-up freely, and become involved in politics again. Most of them didn't take this, worn down by years of anti-Communist propaganda and just the general exhaustion of living such closely-monitored lives. They're figureheads for their provinces, and pursue other careers, like most Provincehumans. There was talk about letting the Northern and Southern provinces reunite during the Sunshine Policy, but South refused to let them go to the DPRK, and North retaliated by refusing to allow his to go south. So that's the context for them. Now the pretty pictures.

Since I go more into detail in Chasing Liberty about the Northern provinces' Occupation backstories, I'll sketch the Southerners' out

here. South Chungcheong gets an entire chapter in CL, so I'll just leave it at- she was a secretary in Taejon before being moved to Seoul, working in the City Hall for the Governor-General. North heard where she was from some contacts. The flower flag is what they would look like at the end of Warring Pyongyang.

He was a Hong Kil-dong type, working with what was essentially a group of bandits, robbing from the rich/Japanese and giving to the poor. He heard about North and comrades from some villagers they had helped, and tracked them down.

Kept in Namsan by the Governor-General as a trophy, until North's failed break-out made them move him. South Chungcheong found the new location for them, and they succeeded at breaking him out the next time.

She was taken in by a rich landlord and used as a slave. She had to take care of his children, cook, clean, work the fields, and support his wife. His wife came to see her as a daughter, and having heard about North, leaked her location, hoping it would get to him. It did. Her son inherited the land after his father mysteriously disappeared, along with South Gyeongsang.

He was taken in by a rich Japanese man who kept him as a pet of sorts. He taught him photography and treated him well, but very much 'lesser than.' North found him because the man had been searching for South Gyeongsang to have a 'matching pair,' and had offered to buy her from her landlord. These papers made their way into North's hands after aforementioned mysterious disappearance. The rich man unfortunately did not disappear (though he's no longer rich after his home burned down with everything inside), but his 'pet' did.

SJ was sheltered from Japanese officers by a brothel owner who took her in and quickly hunted down NJ when she came looking in Gwangju for her. They ended up becoming courtesans. Their circumstances were different than SH's, since their goal wasn't to make as much money as possible, but just to have safety and protection. They were taught how to play go, chess, and other games and instruments, as well as to dance and sing. They were more about entertaining than sex, and the owner only sold them for

the latter for *a lot* of money, so it didn't happen very often. They used to be identical people with identical personalities. They developed this as a defense mechanism. If they were different, then 'clients' might prefer one of them more, which would lead to more suffering for her, or even getting sold completely, separating them. But if they were the same person, they were the same commodity. It wasn't until being separated after the Division by Rhee's government that they started to find out who they were without each other. There is a sad echo from the past in that they pretend to be the same still to market themselves nowadays.

Jeju also has her backstory chapter in Chasing Liberty, but she was formed after the Division, put under American control, ran off and joined the Communists, participated in the Jeju Uprising, and was punished after it was crushed. She screamed her voice out, and still bears the whip marks on her back.

He and Kangbuk were the same person during the Occupation- Kangwon. He lived in the woods of his province and helped a nearby village with minor ailments and injuries. North found him after leaving Seoul half-dead, and having the good fortune of running into a couple who had relatives in the village and had heard about Kangwon. They took him there, the villagers pointed him in his direction, and he collapsed at his feet. After healing him, Kangwon decided to go with him. He was split in half by the Division, and North had to send Kangnam south. Despite not being politically active like North Chungcheong, he is the most-watched Provincehuman. He's autonomous, closest to the border with North, and was with him for most of the war. No longer constantly surveilled does not mean not surveilled at all. Also if you notice in Chasing Liberty he says he prefers to speak verbally, while here it says he prefers to speak in sign language, it's because his nervous stutter got worse over the years after being put back into isolation.

The reason I place the Northern provinces in government positions and the Southern ones in regular ones (sometimes at odds with their government) is because they represent the masses- dictatorship of the proletariat, where the people are in power, versus the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, where they aren't. You have the freedom to act and start your business and wander the wilds, but

you have no power to actually change anything. The DPRK is the outlier, not the ROK- in most countries, provinces and states are just figureheads with no real power (or *do* have power through lobbying with powerful businesses, like America, where Statehumans represent the bourgeoisie instead of the masses).

Burkina Faso

[image] [image]

Inspired by the KPA soldiers sent to Burkina Faso to protect them from coups. You might not know this, but the DPRK has a long history of helping liberation movements in African countries, from sending soldiers, to bringing them for training in the DPRK, to selling weapons, sending workers for infrastructure (and statues, North Korea statues number one, baby), and medical teams. They trained black African guerrillas to combat the whites in Rhodesia, too, and South Africans were some of the people not allowed to visit the DPRK because of the apartheid (along with Americans, Japanese (sad but understandable, and before I was alive), and Israelis). Many of the African countries cut off relations after the sanctions were tightened, but Ibrahim Traoré restored them back in 2023. He's turning things around for Burkina Faso. I really like him, and I am sending my full force of 'don't get assassinated by the French or Yanks' energy to him. The DPRK was forced to recall their workers because of sanctions (including medical workers in war zones; one thinks of the US saying that people working with Cuba will be denied visas, meaning officials of poor countries are now wary of allowing Cuban medical teams (some of the best in the world) in to aid them). The sanctions don't allow North Koreans to work in foreign countries, and ordered that any currently there had to be sent back, or the host countries would be punished. But remember! Africa is poor because they're Africa, and for no other reason, and the DPRK is isolated because they refuse to let their people leave! Ignore the fact that every time an African leader that wants to nationalize resources and kick occupying forces out takes power, they get promptly assassinated, and the country is carved up for Europe (usually the French) and America again. And that the DPRK has student exchange programs, military exchange programs, doesn't have any laws against leaving the country, had a nearly open border with China during the Arduous March, still has traffic between their countries (covid excepted), had probably thousands of workers that they desperately wanted to leave the country to make money before the UN deported them, and still does anything

it can to get workers out to foreign coutries for work. Ignore that. Anyway, I wonder if this and Kursk are a precursor to reaching out to directly aid liberation movements more often again. That would be good. We need that Pan-African Union.

I like to think whenever North rekindles diplomatic ties or just starts co-operating more with a country he already has ties with, China harasses him over it.

'So Burkina Faso is your new best friend?'
'What?'
'*sigh* I see how it is. You help a man win a war, spend three years by his side, support him for the next several decades, then he throws you out like nothing for a country he just met.'
'What are you talking about? Burkina Faso and I have been allies since the 70s.'
'So you've been running around behind my back for all that time? Aiya, I didn't realize I was wearing a green hat. At least I look good in that colour.'
'??'

China of course can spend as much time with as many other countries as he wants. If North complains it's because he's jealous and possessive (All North said was literally 'Are you and Namibia working out a new trade deal?').

Kishock Harpoon Gun

[image] [image]
[image]

'I'm Commander South Pyongan, and this is my favourite store in Pyongyang!' -sentences that are just statements if you don't know what I'm referencing.

South Pyongan and her Geneva Convention-violating sniper rifle. Yanks beware. She's shooting from the hip and taking yours clean off. Like they say 'No bastard that shoots at you with a Kishock wants to take you alive.'

Kangwon: That went well.
South Pyongan: She said 'I should go.' I don't really sound like that, do I?
Kangwon: Yeah, kinda.
SH: Maybe we should be more focused on this impenetrable Vault we're stuck inside forever.
South Pyongan: I'm more confident than she is. I'm more like, 'That's all for now.'
Kangwon: Exactly. Full stop. You're the one ending the conversation.
SH: I doubt there's much air in here, either. Maybe an hour at most.
South Pyongan: Or sometimes it's 'I'll talk to you later.' Because you know what? I never do. Leave 'em wanting more. Maybe...
SH: South Pyongan why aren't you more worried about this?!
South Pyongan: Hm? Oh, right. North Pyongan, you out there?
North Pyongan: Yes.
South Pyongan: Good. Break us out and go find the others. No one steals my ship. Not even me.
('She' in this case is South Pyongan's evil clone)

Even if you don't play video games, you should play Mass Effect. It's so good and makes me cry very often. I was only able to play fully through the last game once because it made me so upset. Now I just replay until the final mission and quit.

Dissolution (One-shot)

August 22, 1910

Junghwajeon was bathed in warm summer light that filtered through the latticed windows, motes dancing in spirals through the beams cast upon the stone tiles like fleeting fragments of a glorious past. It shone on the crimson-painted pillars and the intricately carved ceiling, and gleamed from the golden dragons that played above, casting dappled patterns below.

The hall was smaller, but no less magnificent than it had been before the fire of 1904. The throne that graced its head was grand, dark wood curving before a mural of Korea, crafted by the best artisans that money and divine blood could procure.

And the man upon it had never felt less deserving.

The Korean Empire sat with his head up, his eyes trained on the doors before him.

For once, his person did not swarm with attendants- serving girls bringing him platters of fruits and sweetmeats, tasters sipping from silver goblets, lest their Countryhuman be brought low by poison, women strumming kayageum and singing soft songs, or government officials whispering information from his shoulder as yangban supplicants bowed before him.

It was only he, dressed in military regalia as black as the ink that he would soon use to sign away his country. Perhaps not proper for such a ‘momentous' occasion. But as he had risen this morn, he could not bring himself to bade the servants dress him in his sibijangbok. For how was he to wear the long red robes with their twelve emblems, the symbol of an Emperor’s dignity, when today, he would relinquish Korea’s?

Nor could he bear to lift the twelve-stringed crown onto his head. It sat bare.

Even the silver and gold tasselled epaulets on his shoulders, and the crimson and azure thread woven into his uniform were heavier than he could bear. He was dressed as a general meeting another to either discuss a peace, or to draw blood, two men meeting in an equal exchange.

And that was not what this was.

The doors at the end of the hall opened, and he felt something spark in his stomach. How long had it been since he felt such a feeling? How long had it been since he had been in a position to? He could no longer remember what it was to take a sword in hand for more than a portrait, what it was to feel the blood sing and the heart pound as the blade came towards you.

It was not who he was expecting.

"Gyeonggi-do."

The woman strode through the doors, her saffron yellow skirts billowing around her in a cloud of winding flowers and vines, her green skin made even more vivid by the sunlight. *'The colour of maesils,'* he had once murmured against her neck, their lips sticky with the juice of those plums as they sat high above Hanyang.

Hers were not upturned today, nor were her white eyes brimming with heady satisfaction. Her lips were pressed thin, and her gaze burned from within its beds of coal and crimson paints.

"How could you do this?" she demanded.

The Korean Empire- Heavens, he had never grown used to the name in the thirteen years since he had taken it. *Joseon* sighed wearily.

"You should not have came. I bade you remain in your chambers."

"To remain until the last!" she cried, stopping at the foot of his stairs. "To remain until I dissolve into dust, without ever seeing you once more. How could I bear that? How could *you?"*

"If he lays his eyes upon you, he may decide to take one last thing

from me."

"Then you should lift your hand to stop him!" The hair pins and beaded strings woven into the black fabric piled upon her head trembled in indignation, filling the hall with their clattering.

Joseon closed his eyes. "I cannot."

"You can!" Gyeonggi cried. "The Hamgyong brothers wish to defend our land, and Gyeongsangnam has sworn to take up the sword, if only you ask! We can *fight."*

"You are a woman, Gyeonggi-do," the Countryhuman told her heavily. "You know nothing of the ways of war."

She stood before him in her layers of fine silks, her paints and her jewels, and her ribbons pinned up in imitation of a court lady's hair, her soft hands hidden in sleeves that near brushed the floor. Her form was rounded, well-fed on stuffed pheasant and honey cookies.

And he was no better than her. This uniform with its expensive threading and decorative sash was not meant for the battlefield. It was meant to dine at banquets with those generals returning from it.

"We have no army, no means to defend against the soldiers he has already infested our country with."

"Soldiers that *you* let in," Gyeonggi shot back.

He sighed heavily. "Yes."

Her jaw feathered. "You should not have signed that treaty. Either of them. And you should not sign now."

"I had no choice." If he had not, if he had challenged his cabinet's acceptance under the threats borne against them and overruled the decision, he knew very well what his fate would have been. And that of the others.

'And yet fate has caught us in the end.'

“As I have no choice now.”

Gyeonggi stared up at him, then shook her head, setting her pins singing. “I cannot accept this.”

“You will.” Joseon sat up slightly, looking down at her. “You may be First Consort of the Korean Empire, but you are still a Provincehuman, and a woman. Your decisions are not those of Korea's. *Mine* are. And you will not interfere with them.”

Her eyes flashed, but after a moment, she dipped her head. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

He slumped back into the throne, rubbing his face, feeling the swirling taegeuk on it. Would it change, after he was gone? Certainly. He knew no trace of Korean pride could be allowed to remain.

“May I stay?” Gyeonggi asked, her head yet bowed. “If she does not interfere, may Gyeonggi-do be permitted to spend her last moments in her country’s presence?”

It was a danger to her, and to them all. If the man he was expecting took liberties with her, he would be expected to witness it without intervention. It would be difficult to crush his pride enough to watch his favoured consort be desecrated.

“News came from the provinces,” she said when he had not made his decision. Her voice grew less formal, quieter. “Pyongannam’s attendants report her missing. And Chungcheongnam has taken her own life.”

Joseon closed his eyes. The Southern Chungcheong had always been emotionally fragile. She had never quite recovered from the splitting of divisions in 1895. He had only ever lain with her once to fix her consort status, so poorly had she taken it. And that was with her Countryhuman. He was unsurprised she would choose suicide over even the possibility of being violated by the Japanese.

“Any word of where Pyongannam has gone?”

“Perhaps to her sister,” Gyeonggi suggested.

Joseon thought it doubtful. Pyongan had always had a streak of mischief to her, and with her division, his youngest consort had become half a man, eschewing her court gowns and veils for simple skirts and jeogori, baring her breasts like the peasantry. More like it was that she had set for the capital to challenge the one who would come today.

No matter. She could not move quickly enough to intervene.

He was already here.

Joseon tiredly gestured with a hand, and Gyeonggi blinked, surprised to find her request accepted in such a manner.

"The throne, Your Majesty?"

"Gyeonggi."

She heard the heaviness in his voice, and overcame her hesitance to ascend the stairs, and stand beside his throne, upon which he took her hand, twining their fingers together, maesil wine spilled on white cloth, forgotten in their distraction.

"Joseon," she said, one final, quiet plea.

"It is no longer the time for words, Gyeonggi-do."

She gave in, as they all had, and they waited to meet their fate.

They needed not wait long. The next time the door opened, it was who he had been awaiting.

The Japanese Empire strode into the room, the heels of his polished knee-length boots clicking with purpose on the tiles. He wore a tunic of white, not the colour of the common to him, but of the heavens. A sash banded his chest like a river of spilled blood, bordered by gold, and gleaming epaulets graced his shoulders.

But unlike Joseon, his uniform did not speak of banquets and speeches. It spoke only of conquest, as did the tachi tied at his waist. *This* was a country that had not forgotten how to wield the blade.

“Rise,” that old enemy of Korea commanded, his voice like the gleaming steel at his hip.

And Joseon rose.

“Korea will descend to a height befitting it,” Japan intoned.

Gritting his teeth, Joseon descended the steps until he stood before the other county. He could go no further, and yet he knew he had not lowered himself enough for the other country. The height he saw befitting Korea was that of the Underworld.

“Has the treaty been signed?” Joseon asked.

“Korea no longer holds the right to pose questions,” Japan replied.

A yes, then. Though perhaps he hadn’t held the right to question Japan since 1907, when he had agreed to dissolve his army and turn his internal affairs over to the other country. Or perhaps even earlier, in 1905, when he had signed himself over as a protectorate, relinquishing his right to conduct diplomacy with any country other than Japan.

Joseon had spent centuries in isolation, his borders closed to the outside. He minded not the absence of diplomacy.

Yet when it came not at his own desire, but at that of the country before him, he had found it harder to bear.

“It is time,” Japan intoned. “Korea will sign. And bow before Japan.”

This was it then. The true end of Joseon. It had been brewing for years, ever since the country before him had forced him open, seeing him sign over his resources. Since the fires of war between Japan and China had waged on the Korean Peninsula, with Joseon caught in between. Since the Imo Incident and the coup.

And the Donghak Rebellion. Perhaps that had truly been the beginning of the end. When a handful of barely-armed, starving peasants had managed to shake the foundations of Joseon. How had

it been that Japan had seemed the lesser evil at the time, his aid necessary to put them down?

He had been a fool to think that the treaty between Japan and Qing had been setting him free from paying tribute to China. It had only been preparing Korea to pay tribute to a new ruler, not an emperor, but a god.

Perhaps some part of him had known that Gojong's declaration of Empire was but a dying gasp. But the banquets had been too luxurious, the wines too rich, the palaces too splendid to believe it. It had felt like a resurgence, the beginning of a truly independent country, like they had once been.

And now, Korea would kneel.

He could hear Gyeonggi's hair pins quivering as she drifted into the shadow of the throne. He was only grateful that Japan had spared not a look for her. He saw the woman not as a threat.

He saw Joseon himself not as one either. He was accompanied by no guards. He carried no weapon but his tied tachi.

And he was right, was he not? What threat had Joseon posed? He had not stopped him from opening his ports and claiming his fishing rights. Nor had he stopped him from bringing in his army and dissolving his own. He had only kept signing and signing and hoping he would be left with something.

Perhaps he had brought this on himself. Perhaps they all had, the ministers, the cabinet, the yangban, the King, the Emperor. Perhaps they should have fought while they still could.

But they weren't like the peasants, those people whose lives meant so little they feared not to throw them away. Joseon was the descendant of divinity. His blood could not be shed in a battle he knew he would lose. It was better to die with grace than with the futile violence of a commoner.

Japan's sharp eyes had lifted above his head, to the mural above the throne. The sun and moon, flanking the northern mountains,

the birthplace of Korea.

“Korea does not hold the right to sit on a throne,” he judged. “The blood in its veins is no more sacred than that of the people it rules. The gods it descends from are false."

Once the comment might have made him bristle, leaping to defend the honour of Hwanung and Ungnyeo, of Dangun and glorious Gojoseon. But the years had worn the reverence from the old tales. Joseon was the only god in Korea. At least for a few more minutes.

“No more false than yours,” he replied, yet unable to ignore the slight entirely.

Japan did not bristle, either. He neither drew his sword nor narrowed his eyes. He simply pulled them down from the mural to stare through the Korean country.

“Japan is the Firstborn of Izanagi and Izanami. Korea is nothing. Japan is a god.”

Perhaps the old Japan had been, the very first. But this one before him was so many removed, even if his blood had been divine, it surely would have been watered down like cheap rice wine.

“But this sunless land will be something one day,” Japan intoned. “Japan will teach Korea what divinity is.”

Joseon knew not what that entailed. What he would be signing the Korea that came after him into. And he lacked the right to ask.

“Then let’s get on with it.”

Japan nodded, short and precise. “Bow.”

Every bone in Joseon’s body, every muscle and tendon resisted the order. He was Korean, he was *Korea.* Korea did not bow, not to his own Kings or Emperors, not to his Provincehumans, and not to a foreign country. He had sworn to never again after Qing.

Yet his head dipped, his knees bent, the joints creaking in protest

as he lowered himself down to the ground on one knee, his chin pressed to his chest. Then further, until he was kneeling on the floor, and his forehead was pressed to the cool tile.

His heart beat fast, humiliation flushing his body. It had been over two hundred years since last he felt this way, as Qing stood over him, and named him tribute.

'Pathetic.'

"Korea has the sense not to resist," Japan appraised, then a paper was being unfurled and proffered, alongside an inkpot and brush.

It was that 'sense' that had got him here. Joseon took the paper, and tried to rise, but was stopped by a single, "No."

Gritting his teeth, he only lifted a single leg as he lay the treaty on the stone floor, leaning down to sign.

He need not read the words. The terms had been decided last year. The time had been enough to carve them into his soul.

Korea would relinquish all sovereignty over his nation to His Divine Majesty Japan. Korea would consent to the complete annexation of he and his nation to His Divine Majesty Japan. Korea would consent to placing his successor and all people of Korea into the care of His Divine Majesty Japan. The successor Korea would be beholden to Japanese law and every provision of the current treaties. His Divine Majesty Japan would accord the successor Korea all the respect it deserved.

And to have a successor Korea, of course, that one little line was a necessity.

'The Countryhuman of the Korean Empire and all its Provincehumans will submit to being dissolved, to let new subjects take their place under His Divine Majesty Japan's providence.'

Gyeonggi's ornaments chimed as he took the brush in hand, dipping it into the ink. Yet she said not a word.

She had always been his favourite female province. Bright, loyal,

talented at every performing art you could imagine. There was a reason she had been named the Vivid Consort. He should have liked to cast one last look at her, to see one last thing of beauty before they were nothing but dust.

But he could not bear it.

He signed.

'대한제국,' right under '大日本帝國.' One empire conceding to another, being absorbed.

He did not dissolve immediately. There was one last provision.

"I fail to see the point in such dramatics," he said, craning his neck to look up at Japan.

"It is not dramatic," the country replied. His countenance was neither triumphant nor eager as he gazed down at him. Only cold. "It is ritual. Korea has committed the sin of claiming false divinity. It must be punished."

"If I must be punished, then I cannot see what purpose signing served."

"If Korea fell without signing, the nation would fall to chaos," Japan replied, taking the treaty. "Japan does not want Korea to fall. Japan wants it to rise."

Even as he made him kneel.

"It is time," Japan intoned, his voice like the merciless slice of a blade. "Korea will submit to Japan, and be reborn."

Joseon stared at the floor and the tips of the other country's polished black boots. Slowly, he lowered his other knee, until he was kneeling on the stone tiles for the final time.

They gleamed, polished to an almost reflective state, like wet slate. And for once, he wondered who had cleaned them. Who else had kneeled on this floor, their knees pressed into the hard tile as they scrubbed at the scuffs and grime caked into the grooves. Who

had quarried the stone they were made from, lifted it on their backs and transported it into the capital.

He knew, he supposed. He read the reports, went over the expenses, called for the servants to be whipped when they hadn't done their best. He had always known the extent of the labour they performed, that someone had to thresh the rice that made its way to his table for every meal, that someone had to reach the ceiling to make the scales of those gold dragons gleam. The peasant rebellion had opened his eyes to how destitute and miserable the lives of those who toiled were.

It had never bothered Joseon. It was merely the exchange between them. He was their country- of course they should commit their lives to serving him. Everything that they had, everything that they were, was his.

But to think now that they would perform that same labour for Japan, this foreign conqueror taking the fruits that *he* was owed… It boiled the blood.

Yet Joseon made no protest. He merely hung his head, baring the nape of his neck to the man above him in a sign of submission.

He had seen today as the day he would sign Korea's pride away. But perhaps it had been given away long ago. Under the humiliation of Qing as he made him touch his forehead to the floor, not three times as with his King, only once. But still a submission. Under the repeated assaults from Japan's predecessor as he chipped away at him. Even Ming, as deep as his affection for the man had ran, as much as he still missed him, had once made him bow his head as he pledged to pay tribute.

Perhaps from the very first, when King Taejo's sons were willing to dirty their hands with each other's blood simply to possess a crown, and Joseon had not seen fit to intervene.

"You have nothing to fear." Japan's words were of comfort, but the tone was of ice. "Japan will make Korea greater than it has ever been."

Joseon closed his eyes, and the tachi pierced his back, sliding down into his heart.

Perhaps Korea would someday be great again, greater than it ever had been. But not under the hands of a foreigner. Not under someone who claimed to be their god.

Japan had wanted he and his provinces dissolved to reinforce his own power, to rid the nation of those who had lived longer than him, whose pride and influence would not suffer the insult of colonization.

But perhaps his own intentions would work against him. Joseon was too old, too rooted in his ways to resist. He had grown comfortable, used to a life of worship and luxury. He no longer had the hand or heart to lift a blade in defiance.

But the Korea that came would not be as him. Perhaps he, too, would not suffer insult, but would yet hold the fire to do something about it. Perhaps he could fight, like the peasants that had taken up arms against their betters- dirty, weak, and hopeless, yet still resisting.

Maybe it took a slave to know how to break their chains.

The blade slid from Joseon's chest, and his heart's blood splashed on the floor, brilliant crimson that no servant would have to clean. The tachi was pulled from him, and he slumped to the ground.

Or maybe he was just making one final excuse.

He could not see Gyeonggi, but he could hear the chime as she dissolved into golden dust, dancing in the warm light of Junghwajeon.

He should have liked to eat maesil on Bukhan Mountain with her again.

Motes floated past his own eyes, coming from himself. How strange, that a province and country should dissolve the same. Was this what Ming had looked like, as Qing took his head? Was it what Japan would see as the Korea to come took his?

Joseon's fingers twitched, reaching out for the golden dust of his being. And then he moved no more.

And then he was gone.

Japan stood alone in the dingy Korean hall, watching the golden dust eddy before settling on the floor, the only trace left of a Countryhuman that had lived for over five centuries slowly vanishing.

Pathetic.

Particles of it still floated in the air as new dust appeared, rising from nowhere, spiralling and swirling like a dust devil, coalescing into…

Japan felt a flicker of something he had not felt in decades. Surprise. Though perhaps imperfections should be expected from a country such as Korea.

The golden dust whirled into vaguely humanoid shapes, before solidifying into the forms of Countryhumans.

Two of them.

Two boys, small, naked, and white, and somehow not with his own Rising Sun on their flags, but that red and blue mark of false divinity, though less ornate than their predecessors.

No matter. It would be dealt with.

They both blinked in confusion as the weight of their inglorious history was thrust upon them. Still on the wobbly legs of newborns, one took a step back, his eyes wide and frightened as they caught sight of Japan. And the other stepped forward, baring sharp fangs as he placed himself between them.

Japan appraised his subjects, lingering on the one with the extra aberration before addressing them both.

"You are Chosen," he declared, his tone that of a god decreeing his dominion over the world.

“And from now on, you belong to Japan.”

I will write the North Hamgyong interrogating the Jeollas one eventually, I promise. But I was possessed to do this.

Joseon’s relationship with Ming was essentially:

Joseon: That should be satisfactory.
Hwanghae, scribing for him: Are you certain you wish to start the letter with ‘Dearest Ming, my heart yearn s for you with a passion as hot as the fires under Paektusan?’
Joseon: Yes. Now end the letter ‘Platonically yours, Joseon.’

I think they explored each other’s bodies. I think China probably knows but refuses to tell North because he knows he’ll be blamed for it somehow and injured before being given the cold treatment for a year (he’s right).

Joseon’s relationship with Qing was sending him a fancy scroll that just said ‘Dear Qing, fuck you, get a job you 빈대새끼.’

Pondering The Crab

[image] [image] [image] [image]

[image] [image]

I was inspired.

I think North tends to match with his leaders by accident. SH makes all his clothes, so she'll make him matching ones, or they'll buy him similar clothes as a gift, and he has to wear them because he refuses to buy clothes. His 'matching with Kim Jong-il' era was his slut era, because a few inches of his neck were commonly exposed.

Also someone had a chance to talk to a DPRK diplomat, and he said everyone is fully aware that Comrade Kim Jong-un is a fashion influencer. I forget the exact wording he used, but he basically called him a trendsetter. I like to think North unintentionally is, too, which makes SH even more exasperated that she can't get him to wear anything but black workshirts.

'No one cares what I wear.'
'I heard a four-year old in the department store say he wanted a black collared shirt so he 'could look just like Comrade Korea."
'No one but four-year olds cares what I wear.'
'YOU ARE INFLUENCING THE NEXT GENERATION TO BE BORING.'
'I AM INFLUENCING THEM TO BE NORMAL.'

Also that story about Kim Jong-un banning leather jackets is false (like the myriad of 'he banned this random thing!' stories). I was watching a travel blog from the Pyongyang Marathon (I think it was, it was recent anyways) and I saw two people wearing leather jackets, one of which was a teenage boy wearing the exact same one as Kim Jong-un. So you either accept that 1) the DPRK *did* ban them, but it doesn't enforce its laws with draconian force like everyone says, or 2) they simply were not banned.

These are the pictures I inserted them into.

I love that half of Comrade Kim Jong-il and Comrade Kim Jong-un's job were/is to ponder things. It's lost in my pictures, but I have a photo of Comrade Kim Jong-un pondering something that looks suspiciously like Meridia's Beacon.

And a bonus from 4shiro's Pinterest boards again.

R

ecently I've been having a lot of dreams where I die violently in dark alleyways.

Divided

[image]

Thomas Sankara quote.

Happy Day of Victory in the Great Fatherland Liberation War! If I don't get to go back to the DPRK before the next one I'm going to become a threat to myself and the people around me! (this is a JOKE do NOT censor me. I'm already a threat.)

I think this is actually sort of grim for Victory Day. Perhaps Chasing Liberty will last for a other year (likely) and I can publish the final chapter on the next one.

Anyway, reminder when people say that the DPRK celebrating Victory Day is coping because they 'started the war and didn't win it' it means they don't know anything about the conditions leading up to the war. America is the one coping. They threw sixteen armies with even more nations backing them at one developing, fresh-out-of-feudalism state, and couldn't stand against them without using their completely unchallenged Navy. Then even with complete air superiority and constant destruction of every single facility in the North, they couldn't stand against *two* developing fresh-out-of-feudalism states with barely any aircraft. They can lie and say it was just a police action to send the KPA back to the North, but they not only crossed the border twice trying to push them back to the Amnok, but prolonged the peace talks to try and win more ground, and bombed every building over two stories in the DPRK, trying to weaken them enough to crush them. It's clear they were trying to destroy them completely. They punished them with embargoes, demolished every single factory, dam, and electrical plant they could over and over again, drove the entire North Korean population underground, and they *still* couldn't conquer all of Korea. America hasn't won a real war since World War II, and the Soviets did most of that. May the next Victory Day be celebrating the fall of their empire and the annhilation of everything they represent.

The Dumbest Thing I've Ever Drawn

[image]
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This is what you follow me for.

Until I publish the first meet chapter, you have to accept that this is canon.

North can be unpleasant to be around (mostly because he doesn't really *want* to be around other Countryhumans). He's very polite with allied anti-Imperialist countries- Namibia, Mongolia, Burkina Faso, Palestine- etcetera- to the point that they would literally not believe how much of a bitch he is to the people that are actually close to him. He can't really help it, it's ingrained in him to try and push people away. Semi-consciously part of him is *trying* to get them to hate him, even though he really does value their friend- I mean comradeship, and doesn't want to lose it. It's more like he wants to want to lose it. He's gotten very lucky (or unlucky) that all the people he's close with have a high tolerance for his attitude. China likes unpleasant people more than people that hold their tongues, Russia is fully unaffected by him because of a combination of low self-esteem, himboism, and seeing North as a brother, CCCP has the patience of a man with dozens of children, and Cuba is just a good-natured guy who gets why he acts the way he does. (most of them are also lucky that North has a high tolerance for bullshit)

This is all to say I like to think he does his best to piss CCCP off during the trusteeship and after, too, and is constantly disappointed. He makes him stand under a low-hanging roof so he has to bend over to speak with him, he subtly insults him, orders him around and makes demands, and CCCP just accept it and

patiently says 'Very well. Korea is in Korean hands.' Which North is pleased by. He obviously doesn't *want* CCCP to try and colonize him, and he's glad the Northern half of Korea had a very high degree of autonomy during the trusteeship. But he also has this preconceived notion of other countries that he wants CCCP to fulfill because he can't let himself accept that he could possibly be a man trying to do good, and actually genuinely wants North to be free. Because that's not what other countries do. He wants him to try and hurt him or control him because that allows him to fight back. He doesn't know what to do with kindness. CCCP would take some of his resources and promise to pay him back, then when he actually did by forgiving the DPRK's debts, he just irritated North more. Because before he could have this mindset of 'Aha, see? He *did* take things from me. Which makes his affection easier to bear.' North and his 'dad' that his not his dad and that he hates and also misses terribly.

I'm not sure if I've said this before or if I just thought it very hatefully before, but I despise when someone headcanons that CCCP is the reason North is missing an eye. Really? Between the country that colonized Korea for three and a half decades, committing horrible war crimes against them, the other half of Korea that waged war against them and is responsible for around eighty percent of war crimes during that war, the country that turned the North into glass and genocided up to twenty percent of their population, and the country whose worst crime aside from taking some gold and a couple generators was *one* circumstance of police firing into a rioting crowd, the last one is who you're choosing to take an eye? Really? And then you don't say that America hurt South in any way despite the tens of thousands of people who were killed by and with the support of the American Military Government during very often peaceful protests? Say it with me- you know nothing about history and are brainwashed to think Communism = evil.

Is this a good note to leave on a series of pictures where a boy is getting suffocated in a man's breasts? Yes. Post it.

Liberation Day

[image] [image]

No happiness allowed. The Liberation Day chapter towards the end of Chasing Liberty has been designed specially to kill my audience.

But yayyyyyy! Liberation Day!

I think for North and South they both have never come first in their own lives. For North, his most important person has always been South, and for South his most important person has always been North. But after North leaves it becomes more that the most important person in South's life is this *idea* he has of his brother. Everything he does is for North, but it's for a version of North that doesn't exist anymore. He wants back the person that always put him first and protected him. It almost loops back to being self-centered in a way. While for North, South is still the most important *person* in his life, there are just more important *things.* And in modern day, I think he is still clinging desperately to the idea that South *does* come first for him, he *is* his most important person. But in reality, it's now more what he represents- if he gets his brother back, he gets his provinces back. They'll be free and Reunified, along with all their people. North has never seen any value in his life beyond that of being South's protector and then Korea, and part of him (that he wants to pretend doesn't exist) now sees part of South's value in *what* he is instead of *who* he is, while South sees North's value in who he *wants* him to be.

North and South Gyeongsang remain the only normal sibling pair.

Two Pink Things

A break from the 'traumatizing Hae' chapters of Chasing Liberty to present Hae with a Creature.

I had a dream that I was in the DPRK and they took me to a ritual room so I could witness Juche necromancy bring someone back to life. A man who was sort of Comrade Kim Jong-un but not really asked for volunteers, a woman volunteered, we took her to this room, someone shot her dead, then we did a bit of chanting and she stood back up good as new. And a customer told me that *he* had a dream someone mopped him up from the floor like a liquid. So.

Also I think Juche necromancy might not be common knowledge. It's a joke about all the people that Western media (Radio Free Asia DailyNK, etcetera) say got 'executed' in the DPRK according to anonymous sources who are then seen on television or in a news broadcast several days, weeks, months later. They obviously *are* getting executed because everyone knows anonymous sources cited by news media that gets most of its funding from the American government definitely exist and would never lie. They just get brought back to life through the power of Juche necromancy.

More Pokemon!

[image]
[image]

China is the type to have an outfit to match every Pokemon on his team, while North matches his Umbreon on accident. North is also the type to insist his Pokemon are tools, but then he refuses to keep them in their balls and lets them sleep in the high-rise.

Nipponia: What's your Aggron's name?
North: I don't name my Pokemon. They're *work* animals, not my pets.
Nipponia: Ehhh, that's so boring. *skips away*
North to his Aggron: Let's go, Pulgasari.

I'm going to China! I have my flights and hotel booked! It was all very last minute because I heard Comrade Kim Jong-un is going to be there for the Victory Day parade and I knew what I needed to do. A random tourist can't watch it live, but I will take immense joy from watching a television in a hotel room and knowing he is nearby. I'll probably even cry. Maybe I will visit the Nanjing museum and also cry (probably shouldn't do this). Also if the Americans try to take advantage of him, Mr. Putin and Xi Xinping being in one location, I want to be in China when World War III breaks out. I'm not leaving yet, but I'm so excited! And scared. Airports terrify me. If I walked through an airport and saw someone getting executed next to a terminal for forgetting their boarding pass, I would fully accept that is just something that happens in airports. Also I am cheap so I'm accepting a flight that will take me to Hong Kong first, increasing the amount of airports I must deal with. That's right. I will take a ten hour flight over a three or four hour one just to save money.
Last night I was lying awake with my heart racing, unable to sleep, and I decided that since I was so excited I needed to book it right at that moment. But when I woke up I remembered that a friend had given me a cup of coffee for the first time in my life and I drank all of it. So the racing heart and insomnia might be unrelated. Anyway

AJHSJEEJIWIWKEKEJEJ I CAN'T WAIT. I HOPE I DON'T SCREW UP THE VISALESS ENTRY AND GET DEPORTED.

Beijing Trip!

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I cried when the plane took off and for more than forty minutes into the return flight. I think that says everything.

Anyway did you hear that Donald Trump sent a SEAL team into the DPRK to try and intercept Comrade Kim Jong-un's communications (I don't think that's true, I think it was an assassination team), but when they made landfall near Wonsan, a fishing boat appeared, and they killed all three people aboard and tossed their bodies into the sea, puncturing their lungs so they would sink, then fled. And this was while the Hanoi summit in 2019 was being prepared, when America was supposed to be 'negotiating peace' with the DPRK by getting them to denuclerize (which is why I think it was an assassination team- assassinate Kim Jong-un so that someone with less experience will suddenly be thrust into negotiations). With their words they demand the DPRK give up its means of defense, and with their actions they prove that if they do that, millions of Koreans will die.

Okay fine, pictures of Beijing. Usually I don't post pictures because I'm hyper paranoid that somehow they'll be used to track me down and kill me (and YOU should be worried about that, too- don't post pictures if yourself or neighbourhood online, especially if you're young), but I didn't take these anywhere near my home and I have examined them carefully so I think I'm fine. Also I own a sword.

Them!! I watched the first half of the broadcast on the hotel room television (because I didn't want anyone to see me hyperventilating over Kim Jong-un), then ran downstairs to watch in the lobby with everyone else. The energy was really lively and the parade was

amazing. Comparing it to the American 'parade' was no contest. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that America's only military advantage is their nuclear weapons and the fact that they are all unhinged enough to use a first strike with them. In every other way, China outperforms. I was the only foreigner in the lobby crying, but I was not the only one crying. For one moment, we were all Chinese. Also there is this one foreign reporter whose video is going around xiaohongshu and he also cried, so I am not the outlier here.

Leaders of the free world, baby!

I spent most of my time wandering aimlessly. For five days I have a combined walking time of around thirty hours.

Beijing was greener than I remember, but I also think I have a tendency to think of all cities as grey. Besides Pyongyang, which I think of as retro turquoise.

Falling to my knees in front of this.

I love industrial parks!

And Chollima!!

...don't think I like this guy, though.

One of the small painting cards I bought. It's Choson jewel painting. That chollima statue is outside the Mansudae Art Museum, which is a North Korean art museum in the 798 art district. If you go to Beijing, you need to visit. I'm always overwhelmed by North Korean art. You can't take pictures in the gallery, but my favourites were this painting of North Korean civilian women dancing with Chinese soldier women while soldier men watched, and this one of an old man with a cigarette. It was really detailed and impressive. I think of this one American (I think) man who tried to set up a North Korean art exhibition in New York, but the American government shut him down. He said something like 'North Korea has the world's next Michelangelos, but because of American repression they remain undiscovered outside their own country.' A big part of it is

because artist in the DPRK is a profession. There is no 'starving artist.' If you are an artist as your full-time job, you receive rations and respect. Also whenever you hear 'Well why hasn't (developing or exploited nation) produced great art like the West, huh?' just remember that all nations had great arts and works before Americans even existed, back when they weren't being colonized or kept in a constant state of war. China, Africa, and the Middle East birthed civilization and culture before Western Europe did. But modern day it is hard to create art when you can't even afford food or live in a war zone. And even when you do, if the Western world doesn't like what your art says, or even who is saying it, they will make sure you remain in international obscurity.

Kitty! I only saw two cats in the main streets, but once I started going into back alleys at night I found so many!

Like them.

Zhengyang archery tower.

The menacing orb of the back alley.

This was in Beijing's old town part, near Qianmen street. I just started following people home down alleyways (less menacing than that sounds) to find places. They were right off these very busy tourist streets, and had the sort of houses where they're in small courtyards and down very narrow alleys. It was very scenic and I wandered there for around three hours. Beijing felt very safe.

The back of the Forbidden Palace at night. People complain about getting heads in their photos, but I think that would happen less if they didn't try and get themselves in their photos.

And finally, the evil and malicious Haneda airport. (it's a nice airport, I just don't like going to the city. And also it is NOT the closest airport to where I live, it was just the only place someone could pick me up from (because I am insane and schedule trips to China at the last minute)

I went through a few tribulations, as usual. When I got to my hotel, I was told it was full, even though I had it booked for a few days. Could it be...? It was Victory Day soon, so forgiveness will be granted. I booked a new hotel (SO glad I had a sim card), but I was worried about taking a taxi, since the number connected to my Alipay was on my original sim card, and I didn't know if it would work or not (it does). So I set off on foot to find it. I asked random strangers, I stood by a few uniformed men looking lost until one came to ask if I was okay, followed his directions to the bus, had trouble paying so they told me to just sit, had a nice man beckon me over to show me how to activate my bus card, got off the bus (no longer a criminal), got very lost, wandered through residential alleys, tried to ask a taxi driver if he knew where the place I was looking for was (he did not), finally realized the map I was using was wrong and figured out how to use the Didi Travel one, and FOUR HOURS LATER found my hotel before my reservation expired. Then on my second to last day my data stopped working. While I was on the opposite side of the city from my hotel. After walking for over thirty hours in total the past few days and eight hours on that day alone. Near midnight. On the *one* day I finally used all my cash. Okay. I hunted down a police officer and managed to communicate (VERY glad I had a Mandarin language pack downloaded for offline use) that I needed WiFi. He hotspotted me, I got a taxi and paid using hotel WiFi. The next day I ran to a bank to withdraw money to pay a taxi to take me to the airport, where I found out that all I needed to fix the data was remove the sim card and reinsert it. Also the ONE time I had to use a squat toilet (don't mind, we have them, too, and when I was young the plumbing in my childhood home never worked) I was wearing a skirt over a one-piece which meant I had to strip down in the stall. These sorts of things are basically what happen to me whenever I try to do anything. But! Do not think I am bitter. I like that the world is conspiring against me because when I OVERCOME and WIN it means I am BETTER. Also I have fun doing anything and all the 'bad' luck balanced out with good. So maybe the world is conspiring *with* me. ^=-v-=^

Beijing was so much fun! I forgot how much I love the way it smells. It was even better actually seeing it from outside a car/train. And I finally understand when Chinese people say their pork is

better than ours. I found a bunch of parks, ate some very tasty offal soup, got pressured into buying several Chinese-style shirts at the Hongqiao Pearl Market (you should go here but NOT if you aren't good at saying no to retail people), found worthy challengers while crossing the road (I like when traffic fights back), bought much Chairman Mao merchandise (saleswoman realized I was an easy mark), and some evil souvenirs for my coworkers and friends (I have actively been discouraged from buying souvenirs because I always get the most obscure things- this time one friend gets a demented wooden off-brand labubu, and my coworker is getting a piece of bamboo that I am going to tell her is a special Chinese talisman that brings luck), and got to eat tanghulu and natsume tea. Everyone was very nice to me, even the woman who exiled me from the first hotel. China is so pretty, and I really want to visit for longer. Mother says when I was young, I watched a Chinese program on television and became so obsessed with it I started trying to learn Mandarin, and came to her crying 'I want to be Chinese.' Time is a circle.

Visit China, you won't regret it. And I guarantee you will not be put through as many trials as me.

Dad's Least Favourite Daughter

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Happy Day of the Foundation of the Republic!! This is why North doesn't drink with his provinces anymore. Also more Beijing pictures. ^^

Another place I found while following people.

Zhenyang archery tower again.

I really liked this one area as you can tell.

The flame statue for the 80th anniversary (and some censored aunties).

I spent a very long time near Qianmen Street. It was very much a tourist area, but it was so pretty! And I'm a firm believer that if it is your first time being a proper tourist you should experience touristy things. Don't ignore classics just to be different.

And the empty back streets near there were all old style, so pretty!

There's this one market I went to called Panjiayuan Market, and it had this store in the hidden corner (I like going to empty side streets and dark alleys, it is a passion of mine). It had lots of neat souvenirs (I was targeted again, merchants can sense I like acquiring trinkets). I bought a cute little wooden cat, then the lady snatched a bamboo charm to show me. She rubbed it, and I said bùyào (don't want). Then she clicked her tongue in a hiss and scoffed 'bùyào' scornfully and slapped a hand on the counter before rubbing the charm more aggressively. I couldn't argue with her tactics, so I bought it. I am giving it to a friend as a souvenir and telling her its a traditional Chinese charm that brings luck when you rub it. She tried to get me with a wooden hairpin, too, but I stayed strong. Even though I sort of wanted it.

Longtan Park. I didn't want to get a ticket to get in, so I just walked a lap and a half around it and took a photo through the gate. Also on my walk I think I saw a vial of blood topped with a cross on one of the old wall window alcoves, but people were behind me so I couldn't stop to check.

Sorry, I have so many pictures and I want to show them to people. Beijing was so nice, I want to go back. ㅠㅠ

Philippines, Eritrea, and Libya

[image] [image] [image][image]

Philippines is a very bubbly, seemingly carefree person, who loves karaoke, music, sitting in the backs of cars while they go very fast down narrow roads, and swimming. She sort of comes off as a manic pixie dream girl (especially to America), but it's a defense mechanism she's developed growing up dealing with colonizers. She has no idea about the Communist movements, she's too busy dancing in the rain and talking to flowers. She's not afraid of being alone with America, she just wants to show him Filipino culture, which always happens to be around other people. She doesn't hate the government, she doesn't even know what's going on half the time. In reality, she's more cynical than she pretends, leans left, and tends to subtly influence students to be critical of their government. She's fully aware of who America is, and fully aware she can't do anything about him. And fully aware of how much danger she'd be in if he didn't buy her act. Her position as Countryhuman is mostly symbolic.

I based her tattoos on those done by Whang-od, the very old Filipino mambabatok lady that does traditional tattoos. They go all the way up her arm, and she has another sun on her bicep.

Eritrea is a more serious, authoritative person. She's not a Communist or Marxist, but she is an anti-Imperialist (North is intent on making her read Kim Il-sung because he thinks she would appreciate her own version of Juche). She doesn't have much control over her government, but her role is more than symbolic. She just doesn't tend to curb any of their more unpleasant actions because as someone who lived through the Italians, she won't risk deposing her own government for something better because of the risk of American interference turning it into a colour revolution, and her becoming colonized again.

She's wearing a guerrilla uniform with patterns inspired by Eritrean tibeb. From what I read, the patterns can be specific to represent

ethnicities and such, so instead of copying a real one I made her own. The Italians also used mustard gas and other chemicals against civilians during their second war against Ethiopia, of which Eritrea was a part of at the time, so she gets mustard gas scars.

Libya. A kind woman with a deep sadness and too much trust. She believed abandoning her nuclear program would keep her safe from America. She was wrong. She disappeared in the chaos after Gaddafi was tortured and murdered. No one knows if she shared his fate, but most are sure whether or not she did, she killed herself after. She's an example of a Countryhuman dying and the country falling into chaos for years. From 2011 to 2022, there was no Libyan Countryhuman.

She's wearing a uniform I saw one of Gaddafi's woman bodyguards in because I liked it. And also a Libyan tarha.

Also North and China with the S-lines. In this world North's slut-shaming of China would be much worse because he would get mad every time he saw all that red.

Mournfully: I want to go back to China. I have a lot of savings. I should just quit my job and travel until the money runs out and I'm stuck in a foreign country. I know this is the devil talking, but he's sounding very persuasive right now.

Main Cast Countries

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Finally! Character profiles for all the main countries in my books. I'll also add their physical/mental ages and what race/ethnicity they consider themselves.

Countryhumans don't age- they're formed at an age, and they can only change with a flag or major government change. They are mentally and physically this age forever, barring those changes. They can accumulate more experience, but they can't accumulate more years. So no deteriorating joints or dementia, *but* the traumas do tend to pile on. Most Countryhumans fall into the 20-mid-30s age range, with some exceptions (all former Soviet Republics were 12 for example, and Britain is early 50s, while the England that became him (the British Empire) was early 40s). No one really knows what causes these exceptions or what determines a Countryhuman's physical age, but in some cases it does seem to be an expression of their desire. The countries that formed CCCP initially were all mid-twenties adults, but he formed as a forty-eight year old, and the republics that formed in their places were twelve-year old children. CCCP didn't do this intentionally, but he did desire to be a father, so it seems he might have had some influence. The same goes for Krim.
Countryhumans don't actually have races because they're multi-coloured flag creatures. So their race is whatever they consider themselves. More monoethnic places like Korea and Japan tend to consider themselves firmly as that race, while multicultural places will either consider themselves mixed, drop race entirely, or if they're settler colonies or just heavily right-wing, consider themselves the dominant race. The UN considers himself as having no race/ethnicity.

North was formed at 16, and all his provinces were formed at 15. With the declaration of the DPRK, he aged to 25, while the provinces are 24. He considers himself firmly racially Korean, as do

all the provinces, north and south.

South is the same as North for age- formed at 16, aged up to 25 a month before North, as the Republic of Korea was rushed to be declared against popular opinion in order to deepen the divide between Korea. He also considers himself firmly Korean.

China is physically 26ish and always has been. How long has he been 26ish? Only he knows. He considers himself Chinese, representing all of his different ethnicities. He feels an equal attachment to all of them. He usually wears Han clothing when on the international stage, but at home he wears a far more diverse array of cultural clothes.

He has tattoos- a double-headed eagle on his back, and a homemade hammer and sickle on his left ankle.

Russia used to be physically 12, like all Soviet Republics. With CCCP's death they become 20. He considers himself racially Russian, and refuses to elaborate on what that means (it means he identifies with all Russians, regardless if Slavic, Central Asian, etcetera). Russian Nationalist, but in the sense that Putin is, where many right-wingers hate it because he doesn't just mean white Slavs.

Was a late 30s man, then a mid-30s man, then a 16-year old girl, and now a 20-year old girl. Considers herself firmly Japanese. Technically Yamato, though she doesn't think about that distinction much.

In my heart, I really want to say he has a tattoo of a naked blonde woman holding a heart on his right bicep. But I'm undecided. So you can headcanon he does, if you want. I think he does have an eagle on his back holding a banner that says 'GOD BLESS THE USA' though.

He was 12 when he was a colony, and after gaining independence, aged up to 28. As a settler country, America sees himself as firmly 'white.' While New Zealand's attitude has shifted to consider herself half-white, half-Maori, he has only doubled down. He is a white,

Christian nation, goddammit. (his thoughts, to be clear).

Physically 48. He considers himself a mix of all his ethnicities in a way that he simply labels 'Soviet.'

The red stitches on her wrist are tattoos. She has more on her other wrist and around her upper arms.

Same as Russia- 12, then 20. She considers herself white Slavic Ukrainian. A bit of a Ukrainian Nationalist in a way that is decidedly white Nationalist.

He also has a tattoo of Ukraina's name in a heart on his right bicep. America convinced him to get it. 'Chicks love that shit.' Ukraina did not love that shit.

Canada was physically 12 like America as a colony (specifically Upper Canada was; Lower Canada was 18) and became 25 when he merged. He considers himself white (and a little bit Québécois, to Québec's irritation), but less firmly than America. With time (and deNazification) he would start identifying more with his indigenous population and consider himself half.

Palestine and Israel were both late-20s, but I feel like as a settler colony Israel had a subconscious desire as he formed to be pettily a year or so older. Like how Israelis say things like 'We were there before the Palestinians!!' but then they're allergic to olives, have skin the colour of white jade until it burns in the sun, and their family name is Milewicz. Anyway, UIP is physically 27. And considers himself half-Palestinian, half-Jewish (specifically *not* Israeli, once he stabilizes).

She used to be early 20s, but is now 12. She shrunk after the fall of the Soviet Union, possibly from some desire of Russia and Ukraina's. They wanted their father back, but since that couldn't happen, they were given the possibility to *be* parents. She can't remember her adult life as anything more than a dream since a child's brain comprehends things differently. And I've said this before but I repeat- this is *not* a 100-year old loli situation. Chronological age doesn't matter- Krim is physically and mentally 12. I stress this because there are a lot of freaks (derogatory) out there. She doesn't

really think about race or ethnicity since she's a child and hasn't been exposed to prejudices the way some children have. Because she is a creature. Russia says she's Russian (refusing to elaborate) so she says she's Russian, too. His nickname for her is 'my little homunculus.' Ukraina hates it because she knows exactly what he's referencing. Also the lucky knot on her sash obviously came from her favourite uncle.

Collection of the most unhinged, difficult people to know. And Krim.

Colonies

[image]

North and America are character foils?
Always have been.

I won't elaborate more on this. It should be clear while reading Chasing Liberty.

America is using the Red Ensign flag, which is what the American colonies used for many years. The stars and stripes with the Union Jack was only around for about a year during the American revolution. (Upper) Canada in the corner uses the same flag. America and Canada weren't children at the same time, but shhh, it's symbolism.

North is only taller than America because he's 16, while America is 12. He's still very underweight. Even without being starved, he would still be small for his age, as he's an 'unhealthy' colony. America was formed 'healthily' because he's a settler colony. He *is* a colony, but he's also the colonizer, while Korea is solely the colonized. The British Empire never abused America in the way Japan abused Korea, beyond spanking him, which wasn't seen as abuse back then (still was). It was more emotional abuse, urging him to be better, telling him he wasn't doing enough, asking if he should erase the colonial project (Virginia/America) and try again. Britain very much had a king's view of his son as more of a tool than a loved one, but he still saw him as *his.* He was a good, proper English country, not one of those 'savages.' This is likely the root source of America's superiority complex. No matter how he disappointed his father, how not good enough he was, he could still see himself as better than the people he was colonizing. Meanwhile Japan completely othered Korea. He saw *him* as the savage that needed 'civilizing.' (he also had other plans for him) He always said they shared common ancestry, and that was why Koreans belonged to him, but it was always very clear that in his eyes, Japanese were descended from the gods, and Koreans weren't.

Japan is a god, and Korea isn't.
Britain saw America as a king sees a subject, and Japan saw Korea as a god sees a subject.

In the North-South, America-Canada relationships, North and America are parallels and South and Canada are parallels. The only person that would be pleased by this is Canada. And once he found out what North was really like, that would change.

I want to preface this by saying this is not directed at any of my followers with characters like this. If I haven't said anything, I have no issue. I am thinking of specific people that are not you. Sometimes I notice when people have Nazi characters, they do this thing where they say 'Oh, they're just infantry, it's not like they support Germany's ideals at the time, they *had* to fight, they're just good people caught up in a bad war.' And while I think it's okay to have Nazis as characters because there's a lot of interesting things you can do with a character like that- how did he get this way, why does he believe these things, why is he fighting for them if he doesn't believe their ideals- it seems from the amount of Nazi characters and Hollywood movies I see that actually *no* Germans supported Nazism. Somehow every single person but Hitler was just a good person caught up in a bad war they didn't believe in. Who knew! And the specific thing that makes me mention this is that they never portray Soviets the same way. You know, the people that *stopped* the Nazis. They'll never have Russian characters, and if they have a Ukrainian or other Soviet nationality, they're never with the Red Army. They might be against the Nazis, but they also make it known that they're against Communism. And in real life the people who were against the Communists didn't tend to fight the Nazis. They fought *with* them. 'We're all just people! Those poor Nazi soldiers were just innocent, good patriots who were misguided! ...But Soviets/Russians/Communists are the devil and I would never ever feel human connection towards them or display them in a positive light. B-But I'm not a Nazi, promise!' Call me a Khajiit the way I'm scratching these liberals.

I think there's a certain responsibility that comes with having a Nazi/American/Japanese WWII-era soldier character (though these are much rarer, even in Japan; I think it's because the uniforms

were ugly; being positive maybe it's the same reason why Germans don't tend to have Nazi characters from what I have seen). There is a responsibility to make sure the audience *knows* they're a bad person with wrong ideas. Even if they're where they are because they were misguided or don't know the full extent of what the nation they're fighting for is doing, you need to confront that. If you really want them to be a good person you need to show them learning the truth and turning against it. And if you want to make them evil they need to *be* evil. They can't just be a sexy jerk whose beliefs are never examined or challenged. And most people don't dive into that because it requires actually tackling right-wing ideology which liberals, centrists, etcetera fundamentally cannot do. And if you portray a Nazi without properly examining their actions and beliefs, and condemning them, then no matter how much you say 'they're evil, I don't support them,' you are still currying sympathy and positive emotions for Nazis. And I think American movies have that covered with a *much* larger budget.

Women

[image] [image] [image]

As promised, female and male North Hamgyong. Equality is when you are equally likely about to get wrenched by either one.

Those aren't scars from cutting himself, by the way. He would definitely view self-harm as a very 'First World' symptom. He used to work in a factory during the Occupation (long hours, very few workplace safety regulations) so his forearms are covered in burns and scars. He was physically fifteen so they always sent him to climb into the machines.

Also I'm aware that I'm the definition of 'I added eyelashes. He's a woman now.' It will continue.

North and her shameless, touchy friends that she hates. China to me would be the type of woman from fanservice anime that comes up behind her friends and grabs their chest. Then if you try and call her out she just says that it's normal convincingly enough that *you* feel like the weird one. China as a man respects women, but I think as a woman she wouldn't. She'd still be a feminist because she's Communist. She just wouldn't respect them.

Also this pose would equally work with them as men.

Staying with the theme, this rant is about a woman.

Look me in the eyes- representation means *nothing* in politics. In a capitalist state, rulers do not represent anyone but the bourgeois. Members of oppressed groups who gain power tend to be even more hardline in order to 'prove' themselves to the oppressor class. Think Obama drone-striking hospitals and being especially destructive to the Middle East and Africa. In one way or another that was him proving he's not 'one of them.' If Takaichi Sanae becomes prime minster (and she likely will) and I see a single person saying that it's 'progressive' that Japan has its first female prime minister, I will *fillet* them. She is literally a part of Nippon Kaigi (far right group

that a lot (too many) prime minsters have been from). She is a monarchist. She's homophobic. She's sexist. She's racist. Israel and Donald Trump are *thrilled* with her. She denies comfort women and other war crimes. She wants to be 'less dependent' on China while cozying up to America and bringing in more of their weapons. She loves Margaret Thatcher. She's not a girlboss- she is a woman who wants to use the power she never would have gained without feminism to return to a time before it (without giving up her own freedoms, I'm sure). Wanting more women ministers means nothing when she is promoting the good wife, wise mother line. I also think it's a little crazy for the LDP to choose her as party leader when Sanseito is getting more popular. Japanese society does *not* like women, so I can see this causing people (men) to swing farther right. The LDP obviously doesn't care about that, but they *do* care about losing votes. Every single foreign paper I see is calling her anticipatory prime ministership 'revolutionary' and 'a huge change.' It's not. She's the exact same as every single other amoralistic rich bastard that's been in charge. She just has breasts.
Women can be just as cruel and evil as men, worse when you consider that she denies the sex slavery and mass rape of women *as a woman.* She is a part of the cancer that needs to be cut out of this country. For everyone- never vote for or support a politician just because they're 'like you.' They didn't get where they are by being like us.

The real revolutionary women are the ones waging warfare against their governments, the ones in labour unions, and the ones working on the ground in their communities, in parties or not. *We* are the only ones that can change things for ourselves. Appealing to the oppressor class doesn't make you a part of it. Men will never let powerful women raise others up alongside them, and powerful women never actually *want* to because that takes away their special status, just like rich men don't want to pull more poor men up to stand beside them. You can't even view this as making Japan more accepting of women in power because Takaichi Sanae is going to fail, just like every other LDP leader. And when she doesn't end immigration completely the way right-wingers want, and can't fix the economy or birth rate because there is no fixing either of those under capitalism, especially capitalism beholden to Western interests, people are going to say it's because she's a woman. And

that's not fair! Why should all women be judged by one when so many male politicians do disgusting, awful things and all men aren't judged by them? It was a man that took Japan to war, it was a man that sold out the country, it was a man that signed the Plaza Accord and burst our bubble. It's not fair, but it is reality. All women *will* be judged for her failing in the exact same way that the men before her have failed, making it even more difficult for actual progressive woman in the future. It's not fair and the way to fix that isn't right-wing women winning power for themselves to harm others the same way men do. They will never pull us up to stand on equal footing with them. They don't care if women stand on equal footing with men so long as they can pretend that *they* do. The only way we can stand as equals beside both men and with *all* women is by dismantling the systems that position men above us in the first place, and forcibly working to change societal views. And whether it's the bourgeois, a dominant race, colonizer, or the patriarchy, you don't win freedom by playing the games your oppressors created. They were not designed for anyone but them to win.

I'm coming back to add this- you should also be critical of what you hear about female politicians. Because in some cases they will be genuinely trying, and those genuine efforts, usually actually progressive ones, will be demonized because she's a woman and because she's progressive. If you've ever seen an article about Kim Yo-jong, it's usually something like 'Kim Jong-un's sister is even more dangerous than him? She's a cruel psychopath?? She's the dictator behind the scenes with an iron fist???' And she's literally just a Socialist woman who doesn't paste a smile on her face at every press conference while she's busy defending her country against Imperialist slander. If you hear a woman being called aggressive and dangerous, look deeper into it. Would she be being called that if she was a man? And sometimes she *should* be called that, but in that case, men should be, too. I'm being so harsh with Takaichi Sanae because these facts about her are objective, and things she's for sure done or said herself. Mainstream media *isn't* demonizing her, which is how you know she's just as much a part of the system as the men before her were.

School AU

To start with, I don't like school AUs. Why would you *want* to be in school? Plus I think it strips away essential parts of characters. You're telling me that guy ended up *that* traumatized by tenth year? No way. But I do like to imagine silly scenarios with my characters. And I told people I would classify which type of people the provinces and countries would be in school. Also a plot summary of what I would do if I had to write a fanfiction about it. So here you go.

The school would be a more prestigious high school in an unnamed location.

North- School pariah, both because of others and himself. There's a smear campaign against him, but he's also here to get good grades so he can get a good job, not to be liked. It pisses him off to be 'the weird kid,' but he pretends it doesn't. He and South were the sons of a prominent businessman (Joseon/Korean Empire) before their father 'mysteriously' died. After, he and South were split up and he went to live with CCCP, who runs an orphanage. Now he lives in an apartment that's set to be demolished. He works two jobs, one after school and one on weekends, but the cost of living is still too expensive (and he has a bad habit of doing mutual aid when he can't afford to (and forgetting the 'mutual' part of it)), and he's saving up desperately for something he won't tell anyone about. He might get kicked out of the school because he can't get any club to take him (because of a certain someone). To dodge this, he wants to start his own club for community work, but no teacher will sponsor him. Terrorized by dosirak that show up at his house mysteriously.

South- After the 'mysterious' death of their father, he moved in with America, and was crushed when North refused to go with him. He's part of America's clique, and very popular. Really wants to be in the drama club, but 'theatre's for gays' (America's words) so he's in the American football club instead. Doesn't talk to North at school because he doesn't want to ruin his reputation- no one knows

they're related), and can't talk to him after because America says he's a bad influence. Desperately misses his brother.

China- new money rich kid. Developed his own app before high school (essentially this world's douyin), and is involved in the tech industry (and some say he knows how to hack). He helps others go into businesses of their own, so has become more popular with the kids here because of grades instead of their wealthy families. He has enough wealth and influence that even America's clique pretends to tolerate him, but he still chooses to hang out with the weird kid, much to North's displeasure. He seems incredibly obsessed with him for reasons unknown to anyone, including North. He brings him dosirak, but knows that he doesn't want help, so leaves them outside his door. In drama club.

America- Son of the wealthiest man in town (UK), so he's old money. He got involved in his father's businesses young, and rumour has it that he's the one that runs them now. Ruthless, charming, charismatic, he's the most popular person in school. He gets away with anything, possibly because his family is the one that provides most of its funding. Most of North's friends tell him he's paranoid for thinking America is the reason no club will take him, but he's actually right. He really has it out for North, for some reason, and has launched a harassment campaign against him. He's student council president to prepare himself to be a politician.

SH- One of CCCP's orphans, and North's 'only friend' (according to her). She decided that the angry, stand-offish kid at the orphanage needed one, and so has continued to take care of him after he left. She drags him off the roof to eat with her, buys him lunch and forces him to accept it, and tries to get him to socialize. One day America tries something with her, and North defends her, then teaches her how to fight. Class rep, but she has a different homeroom than him. Art club.

North Hamgyong- SH's brother, not happy about it. He hates CCCP, hates the orphanage, hates school, and the only reason he goes is so he can get a job so one day he'll have enough money to take care of his sister. He doesn't approve of her friendship with North, since it makes her a target for America and his clique. But after North helps her out and starts to teach her how to fight, he grudgingly 'allows'

her to spend time with him. This raises his resentment of North, however. He occasionally skips class to smoke. Engineering club.

South Pyongan- most popular girl in school, but not part of America's clique. They have a weird rivalry because of this where you might think they're actually friends. But she's too aggressive for him, and he's too much of a rich bastard for her. Still, she finds their dynamic fun (in this world she doesn't have the attempted genocide of her people to sour her opinion of him), and they hang out a bit. She's very much also a bully, but where America uses psychological tactics and manipulates others into doing his work for him, giving him plausible deniability, she just goes around slamming into people and shoving their heads in toilets. Despite this, she has a good reputation with the outcasts of the school since she targets the people everyone else is too afraid to. Her 'friendship' with America started because she jumped him on the way home, and the tie they reached impressed her. She interacts with North because she's convinced he would be a worthy opponent, and wants him to fight her. A running bit is that she's somehow in a hundred different clubs. Nap club, gaming club, somehow every single sports club, drama club. No one knows how this is allowed or possible.

North Pyongan- He doesn't approve of his sister's dynamic with America, and is convinced there's a darkness inside of him. But their father is the town pastor, and the church is in America's pocket, so there's nothing he can do. Interacts with North because he has to constantly apologize for his sister trying to jump him. He and his sister have a well-off family, so once he finds out North is technically homeless, he tries to give him charity. This doesn't end well. Legend has it that South Pyongan became a bully to make sure *he* wouldn't get bullied for being a sensitive soul. Poetry club.

Hae- a neglected girl that's an easy target for bullies, since she's so nice and from a rural part of the country. Her parents are never home, Hwang is usually at cram school, and she had to leave all her old friends behind to go to the academy, so she tends to wander around so she can feel a li'l less lonely. Lives near the lot North's apartment is on, so she met him by going to ask why he was living in an abandoned building. His big brother instincts activated, so he tolerates her presence so she won't go skipping around town to

encounter any other strange men, and can actually eat dinner. The reason most of his money goes to 'mutual' aid. Agricultural club.

Hwang- the smartest student in the school, but also an easy target. Between linguistics club, cram school, helping others with homework, and his own homework, he doesn't have time for anything else. The one exception is when he once asked North to stay away from Hae to avoid giving anyone more of a reason to bully her. North actually does stay away from her in school to do just that, to Hae's disappointment. But Hwang also asked him to take care of her while he's at cram school since he feels guilty that he's acting just like their parents by abandoning her. He and South Pyongan have a system where she shoves his head in shoe lockers and he does her homework. It keeps other bullies away from him ('He's mine,' type situation), and helps her participate in a million different club activities.

Ryanggang- One of Hae's only friends besides North. He's a boy that grows flowers in the agricultural club, but he doesn't get bullied by small-fry because no one can actually get a reaction from him. 'You're a loser.' 'Ayup.' 'You have no friends.' 'Ayup.' It's too boring. Hae tells North about this and it pisses him off enough that he eventually drags him into his and SH's fighting practice. 'Stand up for yourself damn it.'

Kangwon- The type to go unnoticed. America's 'target' senses have singled him out as gay, but there's no proof, and Kangwon makes himself unable to be targeted, leaving school as soon as possible, and not giving him reactions. He also spends all his spare time in the nurse's office, and there's a rumour that he was the one that slipped the pills that got Belgium suspended into her bag after she pushed Congo down the stairs. She was too wealthy to be expelled, but now no one wants to risk crossing him. Kangwon neither confirms nor denies this. Either way, he's a nice, sweet boy that the nurses vouch for. He's not very devoted to schoolwork, but he wants to be a doctor so he can help his brother with his anxiety disorder, so he does his best. Nature club.

Chagang- NP and SP's cousin, he was brought into their family after his parents died. He doesn't get bullied both because of SP's protection, and because everyone is convinced he's going to light

the school on fire someday. He's very menacing with his tall stature, blank face, and silence. But when he participates in Taekwondo club, he's vicious. He and North both have a reputation as someone dangerous, and don't like talking much, so he is one of the few people that North is willing to let sit on the roof with him.

Japan- She's transgender in this *(sincere* apologies to my transgender audience for the worst representation possible). In elementary and middle school, she used to beat the shit out of North and China, and has almost killed both of them. Now she's a kawaii, bubbly nekomimi who has never done any wrong ever. She insists that she's *not* transgender, and actually just moved here, so she's never even *seen* North and China before. And since America backs this up, it is believed, and North (the only one who confronts her on it) looks crazy. She's part of America's main clique, student council vice-president, and the one that does all the boring parts of America's president work for him.

CCCP- son of one of UK's business partners, who was planning on selling his business to him. When his father died (under completely normal circumstances, old people die all the time), he inherited and dissolved it, not wanting to make wealth off of the labour of others. He used the money to open an orphanage. America bears a huge grudge against him because of this. Wants North to move back and let him officially adopt him.

Canada- America's half-brother. Their parents divorced, and now he lives with his mother (France, a teacher at the school). He's also part of America's clique, but is uncomfortable with the kind of person his brother has become. And with the fact that UK seems afraid of his own son. He has a complex against his golden child brother that he's very good at hiding. Dating Ukraina. Most likely to burn down the school. Nature club.

Ukraina- one of CCCP's blood children. She's in America's clique, but it's less because she likes him and more because she started dating his brother and got brought in. His slander against her father and family make her uncomfortable, but he makes her feel special, so she never calls him out on it. CCCP would like her to grow out of her rebellious phase before she gets hurt, but the more he tries to get her to understand that America and his family are dangerous,

the more she pulls away. Everyone knows she's cheating on Canada with America except for Canada. Horticultural club.

Russia- another of CCCP's blood children. He doesn't take school seriously, and skips class to smoke with Ukraina and North Hamgyong. America likes to take his grudge against CCCP out on him, so he's constantly being suspended for being baited into attacking him. He and his sister have a relationship where she'll insult him when she's with America, he'll insult her back, then they'll go smoke together. Another person that activates North's big brother mode. He's always trying to get him to stop smoking and drinking, and Russia is always trying to get him to come back to the orphanage. Wrestling club.

UIP- Kangwon and Gangwon's roommate. He has a personality disorder, and has to miss a lot of school on his bad days. Kangwon does his work for him to keep him caught up. Biology club.

Krim- one of CCCP's adopted children. She's young enough that she's like a child to Russia and Ukraina, who have 'I'm a better big sibling' squabbles over her. They are both losing. If you ask her, the best big sibling is SH.

Gangwon- doesn't attend school. He has severe anxiety, and stays in the apartment he and Kangwon live in. He feels guilty about how hard his brother is working for him, and desperately wants to overcome his disorder. Hears about North from Kangwon and ends up joining his fighting practice with his encouragement.

North Chungcheong- South Pyongan's partner-in-crime, he joins in with her bullying, but usually not on purpose. He's a bit of a himbo, so he mostly just thinks they're joking around. Lives with CCCP, but only because his parents suck. Hangs out with North because SH does. Wrestling club.

South Chungcheong- The meanest girl in school. Everyone knows to avoid her, except for America. The 'only child' of an old money family whose holdings are being slowly bought out by America, she refuses to acknowledge that she has a brother. Sewing club. She does not participate in club activities.

Gyeonggi- Has no idea how he got into this school. His grades are *not* good. He's one of Hwang's main customers, which is the only reason he hasn't gotten expelled yet. Part of America's clique because he's friends with South; somehow hasn't realized that they're awful. He's the one who always has to run to the store and buy lunch with his own money. South feels really bad about this, but America tells him he enjoys it. Drama club.

South Gyeongsang- Just a kind girl with a normal family, and a one-sided rivalry with North Pyongan, since he's the son of a Protestant, and she's Catholic. Sewing club.

North Gyeongsang- Skips school to hunt bugs. Once fell down the entire flight of school stairs. Nature club.

The Jeollas- twin models that are some of the most desired girls in school. They act snooty and look down on more 'rural' people, and are desperate that no one finds out they come from the same town as Hae, or that they're in agricultural club.

Jeju- The Jeollas' cousin. Something happened in the first year of school that made her too terrified to come back, and made her selectively mute. She's been expelled for not attending, and moved out of the apartment she shared with the Jeollas. They're desperate to find her. She lives in the same abandoned building as North, and is another target of mutual aid.

Mmmmm so if I had to write a story, I'd start off with North in drama club with SH. There's going to be a play at the end of the year (they're all in second year, but North missed the first year of school and did it online) and the art club is helping out with set design, so she dragged him along on their lunch break.

She tells him he should join art club, and he tells her she knows damn well he can't, establishing that someone is keeping him out of clubs, and if he doesn't join one he could be expelled (it's one of those elite schools, okay? They're strict). Then all of a sudden he cuts SH off and turns away. She looks over her shoulder and he drags her back, hissing not to look.

Too late. China has just entered the room and wanders over. He

flirts a little with SH, then notes that North has no lunch and asks if he'd like his (he definitely just happens to have an extra). North is very rudely like 'What are you doing here?' and he raises his eyebrows and says why wouldn't he be here? He *is* the male lead in the play, after all. He says he overhead North's little club problem and asks if he wants any help with that. North tells him to go away.

Once he does, North demands to know why SH didn't tell him China was in drama club. SH scolds him and asks what he has against him anyway. North says he's a freak. She says she thought they were friends because China's asked about him before and he tells her not to tell him *anything* about him *ever*.

Later as the day ends, the principal (UN) corners North and tells him that he has a month to join a club or he'll be expelled. North tries to tell him that someone is stopping him, then that someone cuts in. It's America. He charismas UN away, then subtly threatens North, implying that he should have thought about the consequences before his little stunt in middle school.

North almost jumps him, then America says 'What do ya think the school would think if you went around attacking the scion of their main donor? Besides, you need to graduate if you want to get that thing of yours back, don't you?' North takes a deep breath and leaves, resolving that if he can't join a club, he'll found one.

Some main story beats would be- North needs to have three members to found a club. But this is second year and everyone already has one. He also has no friends. And SH needs art for her university. She suggests Hae, and he firmly says no (we later learn it's because he's vowed to stay away from her at school to avoid her being bullied for knowing him). After a few days, China steps in and offers to help. North turns him down, but he tags along with him anyways.

He doesn't even know what the club will be focused on anyway. He decides on community work. But this is a rich school so most students have no sense of community. And when he approaches North Gyeongsang (who isn't entirely dedicated to his club), he nervously tells him he's heard rumours that joining anything of North's might end badly, heavily hinting that America says that.

North hunting for club members would establish the main characters. He'd have a run-in with America's clique bullying Ryanggang, establishing that Japan used to bully him and is pretending to be a different person. He goes off on her while she plays dumb and he comes off as the crazy one.

He makes eye contact with South and says he knows she's lying, but he looks away. It wouldn't be revealed that they're related yet, just that the vibes are weird. Then China appears and intervenes, smoothing things over. It's clear everyone but America is afraid of him. He chases them off, and North says he didn't need his help, then goes off on Ryanggang for always just taking whatever is done to him. He orders him to meet him after school so he can teach him to fight, and China subtly says that a self defense club would be a good idea. North decides he's right and also that he had nothing to do with the idea.

But he still can't find the last member. As time runs out China offers to drop out of drama club, but North denies it. He's the lead in the play and also he would rather be expelled then do after-school activities with him. Finally on the second to last day, when hope is running out, Canada walks into the theatre and nervously asks if he can join. North is suspicious (this is literally America's brother), but Canada promises he's not here for him. He doesn't really like how America's been acting, and wants to get stronger, so he dropped out of nature club. North accepts him.

But now it's the final day and they still don't have a club room and no teacher will sponsor them. Yesterday night China said he would settle that, but the day is ending and they still haven't seen him. North is stressing and cursing himself for trusting him, but then a teacher walks in- France, Canada's mom. She's clearly nervous, but she says she'll sponsor them and she's got them a room (it's a storage room off the theatre).

Later when North asks China how he managed that, China reveals that she's been sleeping with him, and he's using that as blackmail. North is the only one that sees something wrong with this (because France is an adult woman and China is a teenager) and absolutely no one else has any issue with it. Except for Canada, who is considering suicide.

So North has a club and three members, so he won't be expelled. But America obviously isn't happy about this. There would be a bunch of shenanigans and maneuvering and themes of class warfare (can't turn it off). At some point South Pyongan would join the club (adding to her roster) and tell North that he should've told her it was self-defense club because she's been looking for the chance to kick his ass. Kangwon would introduce North to Gangwon, and he would join, but only attend after school activities since he's still too nervous to go. Jeju is expelled, but she would join during non-school hours, too.

In the background the play is getting prepared- China is the male lead and South Pyongan is the female lead, and they have to kiss at the end. Over time details would get revealed- the reason North and America hate each other is because during the last year of middle school, North and South's father was murdered. North was the one who found the body, and he also found a watch that he knew belonged to America, who went to another school, but he had met briefly while their fathers talked business.

But the police refused to believe him, and in the wake, America's father 'kindly' offered to take the Koreas in, diffusing suspicion even more. North refused, but South went because the other option was foster care. North knows that America only wants his brother to live with him so that he can convince him to sign over their father's business assets once he's of age.

He didn't even like their father and was morally against his business, but he can't stand to have his brother be taken. He runs away to investigate, finding more proof of America's dirty business practices, but even when he finds documents proving that Joseon had refused to sell out to him, giving him a motive, and gets his hands on suspicious financial records from America's house, he's sent away.

Eventually he tries telling the school, but he gets accused of having a breakdown and is sent to a youth psych ward. He knows that America planned this because if he can get him declared to be mentally unfit, the family assets will pass to South.

He has to finish middle school online, and he does his first year of

high school there, too, after moving into CCCP's orpahange. When he emerges from the ward, he resolves to keep his head down and get good grades so that he can graduate, be declared fit to inherit, use their father's money for good, get a good job to take care of his brother, and finally expose America's crimes.

During the course of the story, America would constantly be trying to get him to snap so the court will deny his right to inherit permanently. We also learn at some point before that that North and South are related. China knew and no one else did (SH is miffed).

Towards the end of the story, as part of America's plan to get North to snap, he injures South Pyongan on the day before the big play, trying to ruin all of the comrades' hard work. The second choice is also 'mysteriously' sick, so they have to cancel!

But! North has spent so long helping SH with set pieces in his free time, and being able to hear practice through the storage room walls, that he has the entire script memorized. This would be foreshadowed by South Pyongan flubbing lines during practice (she's not a great actor) and him irritably finishing them for her.

So everyone grins evilly at him. He is *incredibly* opposed to being the female lead, especially acting opposite China. He is *not* kissing another man, especially in front of an audience. But his friends all worked really hard on this play (others were chipping in to help all the America-led setbacks), and they're all begging him.

China takes him aside and very seriously tells him that he knows North isn't the type to do things he doesn't want to do, but he does still want to say that he doesn't have to do this. It's just a play, and it's not even a third year play.

North reveals that he knows China is the one that's been leaving him dosirak, and finally asks why he's always following him around and why he always tries to help him so much.

This is where we learn that China and North both went to the same middle school. They were both poor (North refused to ever wear the clothes or eat the food Joseon bought, taking odd jobs to support

himself instead), and both subject to Japan's physical abuse. North had always rejected China whenever he tried to talk to him, but one day he saw him getting absolutely destroyed by Japan, as in about to die, and he cut in, actually managing to win against him for once. He kicked Japan's ass, helped China up, then left. China had never had anyone help him before, so he resolved to pay him back and be his friend. But that night was when Joseon was murdered, and North threw himself into that, then was expelled. China believed him about America, and was distressed that he couldn't do anything to help North. So he decided he was going to become the kind of person that could. The entire reason he knows how to hack, and fight, and that he put his coding to use to develop apps and get rich, was to pay back North.

In the present, North (incredibly embarrassed) mutters that he doesn't have to pay him back. China says he knows, but he wants to. And he *doesn't* want to do the play if it would make North uncomfortable. After a long moment, North quietly says that he'll do it. China examines him, then smiles and says he thinks he has an idea to make sure no one else finds out it's him on stage.

We get a cut and we find out that America overheard all this. He's pissed that the play is still going, but now he has an even better idea. He's going to Carrie North and get him exposed as the female lead in front of the whole school, simultaneously lowering China's prestige for kissing a man and shattering North's pride, likely enough to get him to assault America, giving him the chance to get him declared unfit to inherit.

But he can't let himself be implicated in this, so he sends South and Japan to do it. He makes Hwang get them the blood (as they're from a farming town) by promising to make sure no one ever bullies Hae again, and that he'll pay for a prestigious university for her. Hwang, knowing that she won't get a scholarship like him, reluctantly agrees, even though he's read Carrie (foreshadow this by have him reading it early on). So Hwang gets the blood and South sets it up in the rafters with Japan. He's really nervous, but America tells him it's just a prank and people will find it funny.

The night of the play arrives. Tension is building. China and 'Costa Rica' take the stage (North is disguised to look like her since their

flags are similar; the real Costa Rica has been bribed to stay home and take credit; since China helped her start up her own business, she's glad to do this). The play goes well. China is an excellent actor and North is very good at monologuing (even if 'her' voice is a bit rough for a woman's). The climax comes.

Cut to the rafters where Japan is holding the bucket of blood, ready to pour it on North. Then out of nowhere, Hwang attacks. He was in the audience and realized to his horror that North was the one on stage (only because he's very smart and knows him). He was torn the entire time, thinking about the guarantee Hae would have for a good life with America's money. Then he thinks of how much North has done for her, and how fond he looked earlier when she hugged him, and he gets up to stop the Carrieing.

So he's wrestling with Japan in the rafters, but he's not very strong and doesn't want to risk knocking the bucket over. America sees what's happening and makes his way up to intervene. Japan manages to overpower Hwang and grabs the rope, ready to tip it. But before she can, someone else grabs it instead.

It's South. He wasn't going to go to the play (*sulkily* 'theatre's for gays'), but Gyeonggi asked him to. And of course he can recognize his brother, even if he's wearing a dress, make-up, and a false eye. He has no idea what the hell North is doing, but he knows if anyone finds out, it would ruin him.

So he has the bucket, Japan is occupied with Hwang again, and America is trying to convince him to drop it on 'Costa Rica.' South says he knows it's North, and he can't let that happen (very much an 'oh okay. But you're fine with two litres of pig's blood getting dumped on a random girl?' moment). America tells him that North abandoned him, so he owes him nothing. And if he wants to keep being part of America's clique, he'll do it.

South realizes that his brother would never give him an ultimatum like that, and tosses the bucket of blood at America, spilling it over the catwalk. Then he takes off over the rafters to the other side (he's a dancer, he has light feet). Hwang absconds as well. America is furious.

Cut back to the stage. North and China are about to have their kiss scene, completely unaware(?) that anything is happening above them. North *really* doesn't want to do this, but he leans in and closes his eyes, heart pounding. China cups his face and... places a thumb over his lips, kissing it in a stage kiss. North is incredibly baffled, but manages not to break character.

The curtain goes down to wild applause, and he quickly pulls away and says, 'What was that?' China kind of tips his head and goes, 'A stage kiss. You didn't think I was actually going to kiss you, did you?' North looks away, embarrassed, and China says, 'Aiya, you really thought South Pyongan and I were up on that stage locking lips every day? No wonder you were always glaring at me.' (South Pyongan is North's daughter-type-thing in every universe).

The entire cast and team take a bow, then North's group rushes in to congratulate him. He's like 'Great, I need to take off this dress *now* or I will start hurting people.'

He goes to change and Hwang comes in after, telling him what happened. North goes to thank him for helping, but he says he wasn't the one that stopped it. North asks who, then the door opens and South comes in. 'Hey brother.' It's the first words he's spoken to North all story.

Hwang leaves and the two Koreas have an awkward sibling talk where North apologizes that he had to leave (but not that he did) and South apologizes for not believing him. He's still not sure if he *does* believe that America killed their father, but he's willing to listen. North says that's all he wanted. They have a tender moment of silence, then South says, 'Soooo. Can I ask why you were wearing a dress and kissing China?' and North tells him to choke and die.

Cut to China watching America storm into a classroom covered in blood. He smiles.

Cut back to North and South leaving the storage room. They run into Canada. He seems... off. North asks what's wrong and he states into the distance and says 'Nothing,' before leaving. North looks for China but can't find him. He asks South to come stay at his place tonight so America won't hurt him, but South says he needs to go

get his stuff, and he still needs to mull over everything North told him. North is very reluctant, but decides America won't risk alienating or killing South when he needs him for the family fortune, so he lets him go.

Cut to South coming home and America being pissed at him but then forgiving him. He gets it, North is his brother. He'd could never hurt his own siblings, so obviously neither would South. But he tells him North just wants South to come back to him so his inheritance won't be contested. He tells South that if he wants to be rich like America, he can help him. And all he has to do is take his brother out of the picture.

The next day is a school assembly. Now that the main crew knows what almost happened last night, SH tells Gyeonggi it's a good thing he invited South. Gyeonggi says China told him to. North narrows his eye. China is still nowhere to be seen. Neither is Canada, or America.

At the school assembly, instead of the UN, America walks onto the stage. North's heart sinks. America starts to accuse him of being the one that killed his father and trying to frame him for it. He tells everyone that North was in a psych ward, he's homeless, and crazy. North tries to deny it, but America says that everyone knows there's something wrong with him, and that's why no one will defend him. People are believing him.

But then everyone that North has stood up for over the course of the story starts speaking up- Hae and Hwang for taking care of Hae, the Jeollas for taking care of Jeju, Kangwon for teaching Gangwon how to fight, Gangwon for giving him the confidence to come back to school, SH, Ryanggang and everyone else. Canada shows up, too, still seeming off, and calmly says his brother is the one with something wrong with him. And that there's *no one* he wouldn't hurt.

America says North may have fooled all of them, and his family, but he can't fool his *own* family. South comes onto the stage and there's a very tense moment where it seems like he's going to back up America. But then he tells the school that he believes his brother- America did kill their father. And North isn't crazy. He's his brother.

America is visibly furious that his plan didn't work, but in a last-ditch attempt to humiliate North, he says he has some pictures from last night he thinks they should all see. He opens a computer and broadcasts to the big screen. But instead of the pictures of North backstage putting in his fake eye to be Costa Rica, up comes a picture of America in a classroom, naked, with a blurred out (yellow and blue) girl.

Ukraina shoots up and Canada calmly stands and walks out. America tries to shut off the computer, but it doesn't work. More images show on the screen- America in dark backrooms with shifty people, papers from America's father's business with incongruous figures, America drinking with politicians in his mansion, a series of suspicious e-mails, correspondences where Joseon refuses to sell out to him, and a series of exchanges where a junior policeman says they should test the watch that Joseon's son found, but a senior police chief says they don't mess with America's family, and to 'lose' it and the financial records.

People are in an uproar and America has lost control of the situation. He turns to North, accusing him of doing this, and is about to attack him. North very smugly tells him to do it. He would *love* to defend himself from him. America bares his teeth and flees.

The UN tries to rein in the situation, and North sees China at the back of the room. He slips out into the hallway and says, 'That was you.' China smiles slyly and says 'Who knows? But if it was, I couldn't have done it without the results of your investigation.' 'You set up South to stop America from dumping blood on me, too, didn't you?' 'I' m sure I don't know what you're talking about. But I'll point out that any blood would have landed on me, too.'

North huffs, then looks over his shoulder. South has stepped into the hall and is clearly looking for him. He looks back at China and mutters, 'Thank you.' China smiles and says 'It's what friends are for, isn't it? Now why don't we all leave the school in a neat and orderly fashion.'

North is wary of what that means, but knowing he won't get a straight answer, they round up their comrades and leave. As they do, China pulls the fire alarm.

A few minutes later all the school is gathered outside. Then real smoke starts filling the building and a window blows out, flames coming from it. Ukraina is frantic, asking if anyone's seen Canada.

China pulls her into their huddle and hushes her. Russia tells her she's lucky she was blurred out in that photo and offers her a cigarette. He is slapped, but she does take the cigarette.

Eventually Canada appears, smelling vaguely of smoke. Everyone is worried and Ukraina is apologizing profusely, but he just smiles and puts an arm around her and says it's okay. He's not upset. He actually feels great.

Later we find out that the fire seemed to be set by America, sent off the deep end by being exposed. He set fire to a classroom, then seems to have slipped and cracked his skull before he could escape. Now all of Britain's fortune will belong to Canada once he becomes an adult.

Inspired by North, he promises to donate it to repairing the school and funding a tuition program for working class students. North intends to use he and South's future inheritance to send them to a good university, then 'become a politician' (he is going to buy firearms and open a dojo on the side; everyone is side-eyeing him because they know full well what he's intending to do).

The epilogue is all of them crammed into North's tiny apartment (China says that the developer all of a sudden decided not to demolish the building) on the last day of spring break, getting ready for the next school year. North and South are sitting next to each other arguing and teasing, being siblings. Then North gets up and goes outside, where China and SH are leaning over the side of the bloc. They have a conversation about the future, and how private schools are weird. SH wonders if their last year will be normal, and North says with freaks like them around, he doubts it. Then they toast to a normal school life (and North's future guerrilla movement).

So! That would be my school au. Sorry it took so long. Also at some point North reports France for sleeping with a student now that he doesn't need her to sponsor his club. Sorry Canada, your mom's

going to jail.

The next Chasing Liberty chapter will be done in a few days. I have a cold and I don't like writing when I can't think right. ㅠㅅㅠ

POV You're China

[image] [image]

POV: You're China having a 'friendly' match with the guy that 'doesn't like fighting.' You're also about to get concussed.

That's North's 'kicked in the shins' smile, by the way. If you can't tell the difference between it and baring his teeth in anger, it's okay. Neither can he. The reason his portrait isn't officially on walls with Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong-il's is because he knows he has an ugly smile, but doesn't want to have his serious face glowering out at his people. Many choose to have his portarit anyway.

This isn't during the war because North was dialectically opposed to smiling during it. And during most of his life. But there was a period in the early 60s when he was getting antsy, and China was also starting to miss the rush of combat, so they started a tradition of going off to some mountain to fight. China enjoys having to think and observe to hunt people down, and while North doesn't like being hunted, he does like to beat the shit out of China. I like to think it started by him coldly ordering China into his vehicle, then refusing to say anything until they were at Myohangsan. Then he stopped the car, got out, and told China to run. Since this was wrapped up in Comrade Mao trying to coup Comrade Kim Il-sung (long story, essentially tensions were building between China and the Soviet Union, and he didn't like that Kim Il-sung wasn't siding with China over them, but was instead remaining friendly with both. And the Soviets didn't like that Kim Il-sung was openly disapproving of them slandering Stalin and turning towards revisionism (fuck you Khrushev and company). And while Mao wasn't exactly friendly with *them,* he saw removing Kim Il-sung as beneficial for China as well as showing the Soviets that they were still willing to get along. The Chinese sent broadcasts over the border slandering North Korean leadership and there were even a few skirmishes. But in the middle of all this, China still gave the DPRK a large part of Paektusan. It was very much a 'we (the leadership) are fighting, but our nations are still brotherly nations.'

So even at the height of it, North and China still visited each other (even if North had to be practically dragged onto the train by Kim Il-sung).) Anyway since they had tensions at the time, and China had been refusing to talk about them with North, the fact that he was suddenly being dragged into the woods and told to run was probably a little heart-pounding. They had fun though, and continued to do it through the years. While they might be glad that their countries weren't at full-scale war with anyone, and their people didn't have to fight, it's hard for those who have been soldiers for most of their lives to settle into a peaceful life, even when they're swamped with work to do. You get restless. Especially North, who had never been anything but a soldier for decades. Meeting up to wrestle once every year or so helps them keep stimulated and work out stress. Modern day they don't do this however as China 'doesn't like getting dirty and never has,' (he yearns to be pummeled) and North no longer trusts him enough to let him hunt him. Though punching China at least once would probably be the equivalent of a month straight of full-body massages for relieving tension.

Here's a version with his shirt open slightly more because I wasn't sure if the other one conveyed the fact that his top button was ripped off well enough.

I had a dream that I was being hunted by two wild dogs down a dark, isolated road, then through a house with thousands of doors. I locked so many, but the dogs were eerily smart and already coming ofr one I hadn't. As I ran for the door they were coming in, I was too late, and this large white wolf beast slammed through it, a black one right behind, and tore my throat out. I woke up after. If dreams are windows into other uses. Us's. Uss. in other universes, then I feel very bad for the other mes. Many of them die violently in the most terrifying situations. Me in another world is running from her life from a shambling horror with no face, until she just stops and screams loud enough that it wakes me up. I wake up making a high-pitched keen, think, 'Wow, scary. Time to write fanfiction!' and she dies paralyzed and alone in the darkened woods, torn open by something she can't comprehend. Sad!

I have never lucid dreamed before in the true sense (okay, once, it

involved shooting lazers at dinosaurs). I usually only ever become aware I'm dreaming when it's a nightmare and I've run out of options (shambling faceless horror is catching up no matter how fast I run). Then some preservation kicks in. Never the type that let's me change the dream or fight back, just the kind that says 'This is a dream and if you scream loud enough you'll wake up.' So I stop (as whatever is hunting me tonight draws near) and scream at the top of my lungs until I wake up in real life. Whenever this happens I wake up quietly screaming with the back of my throat, and my cat staring at me like this ^O-O^.

Unfortunate Shirt

[image] [image] [image] [image]

ˆnuclear engineer, by the way.

Chagang featuring the unfortunate tourist shirt I saw in Beijing. I first saw it in the Hongqiao Pearl Market, and was surprised, as it seemed like a more official place. Then all of a sudden as the woman was trying to pressure me into buying another qipao I realized- OH. 'I LOVE BEIJING.' It was such an epiphany that I almost said it out loud. I think Beijing probably sells a lot of tourists shirts to English speakers, but not because they're tourist shirts.

I love Chagang. He's not dumb, so he fully knows China was causing mischief. He just lets himself be 'tricked' because he doesn't care enough to not be. He also likes when people are amused or happy over 'fooling' him. There is an argument to be made that this comes from North Pyongan always letting his sister succeed at pulling pranks or tricking him because he knows it makes her happy.

I had a dream a few nights ago that I was North and I was with China and Poland during World War II, and we were rescuing him from Nazis. There was also something supernatural going on, but I don't know what it was. We were on a bus at on point. And then I was in Minecraft being hunted by Minecraft Monokuma. I think I woke up when he dug me out of my hiding spot. Much to consider.

Bite

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

In Korea's defense, China definitely knew he was going to do that. He is one of the few people that can recognize the rare times when North/Korea is feeling mischievous (like when he agreed to fight him in Chasing Liberty).

North would never do this. He would want to, but his pride would stop him. South's added personality gives him just enough immaturity that this could be canon.

The greatest tragedy is North being known as 'the one who bites' when the only reason he bit China that first time was because it was what South would do to him when they fought. He is actually very skilled at restraining his 'You mean a lot to me so I want to chew on you' impulse. Also he still disliked China at that point. South doesn't necessarily have those feelings, but he is the type that if you get him down, he will start licking/biting to make you release him. Every time America starts throwing him around to roughhouse, South is going 'You will not lick him you will not lick him you will not-' in his head.

I had a dream I was making chebureki last night, and as I set a cheburek in the pot to cook, oil spilled out all over the stove. I did not turn off the heat or wipe up the oil. I only stood there wondering why it spilled. Then I realized I was not cooking in a pan, but just in a regular bowl set on the heat. I took it off, glad it didn't explode. Then without turning it off, I took a wet cloth and started wiping it directly across the element to clean the oil up as thick clouds of black smoke billowed around me. I was very unbothered, and set the cloth down on the stove, where it touched another element that I had left on for no reason and caught on fire. With great calm I took it and very lazily beat it against the (still on) stove. I did not throw it on the ground or in the sink right next to me. Once it was out and the smoke was gone, someone knocked, and I proceeded to invite my friend in and not mention what just

happened. Not out of shame but because I did not care. Scary how a dream can be so accurate to life.

Checkmate (One-shot)

1997

The one thing they didn't tell you about cleaning up your image- it was fucking boring.

America leaned back in his padded spinning chair, legs up on his mighty oaken desk as he spun a pen around his fingers.

Fucking Vietnam. If it hadn't been for that shit show, he could at least still be in uniform, showing off for the boys in green and preaching fire and brimstone to get folks ready for the Middle East. But after how badly his boys had gotten their asses kicked in that filthy jungle, seeing their Countryhuman in epaulets and a broad-rimmed cap had become too 'unpalatable' for the hippy-dippy freaks in his country.

The pen stopped spinning, creaking tightly in his fist before it regained its motion.

Eh. Whatever. He'd gotten Vietnam in the end. Just two years ago, in fact. Without 'Papa Soviet' to provide, the gook had been forced to come crawling to his biggest enemy. And America had been generous enough to normalize relations, lifting that pesky trade embargo and getting his factories in there, when really all Vietnam deserved was a few billion more tons of napalm.

But that'd be bad PR, especially since there was no need for it. Vietnam was his, just another commie country forced to admit they'd picked a lame horse and open up for the free market. There was just one left now, and it wouldn't be too long before he came grovelling at America's feet. The American would keep pressing his angle about him developing nukes, but he doubted he'd need it.

A few years, give or take. That was all North Korea had left.

There was a quiet but firm knock at the door.

Speaking of countries that had been forced to shoot their racehorses…

"Come in," America drawled, standing up and straightening his stars-and-stripes tie.

A man slid into the Oval Office, tall, slender, with one of those faces that made you think God had screwed up not making him a chick. His chinky eyes kinda ruined it, though.

"Hello, America," the People's Republic of China said, smiling.

It was always Mr. America at UN meetings, but it seemed like they'd be going more informal today. Worked for him, even if he knew what the man was doing- he did the same thing himself.

"China," he said, switching his statesman voice for his parlour one as he thrust out his hand. "Good to see ya."

He grinned, but watched sharply from behind his aviators.

Still smiling, China extended a long-fingered hand from the cuffed sleeve of his slim-fitted black suit, taking his hand in a shake. His grip was solid, less limp-wristed than America had expected.

"So my hands are clean enough for you now?" America mocked.

China raised a brow like he didn't remember what he was talking about. "Why wouldn't they be?"

Irritation flashed through America, but he kept his friendly expression.

"Inside joke," he explained, gesturing at the couches to the side of the room. "Why don't we make ourselves comfortable?"

He kept his Oval Office a little less austere than his presidents usually decorated theirs. The base walls were the same cream colour, but the long navy curtains that flanked his bulletproof bay window were spangled with stars, his carpet was plush enough to sleep on, and all his guest seating was mismatched from different eras, but all padded.

Only the best for those meeting with the most important country in the world. And if he didn't like whoever he was seeing, he could just pull the old wooden chair out of storage and amuse himself by watching them try not to be bothered by the one slightly shorter leg.

But this was a friendly meeting, for now, so he gestured China towards the curved couches along the right side of the room. They were suede, one teal and one orange, patterned with fleur-de-lis. They'd been all the rage back in the 50s.

'Those were the days.' Good food, well-behaved women, sturdy products. Long nights spent strategizing, butting heads with Big Red, directing coups and wars to free the world from Communism. The only catch was not being able to enjoy those wars in person, after what had happened in Korea.

'Too close.'

Aw, but he shouldn't be thinking about that. It'd just put him in a bad mood. CCCP was gone, and soon Korea would be, too.

And China was pretty much his already.

America flopped down onto the teal sofa, draping an arm over the back of it, while China perched on the other one, crossing his ankles.

"So, what brings you here?" the American asked, leaning back. "I can't recall us ever having a business meeting face-to-face, even back in '79."

The Chinese leader, Deng, had visited. But the Countryhuman himself had been conspicuously absent.

"Back when you opened me up." There was a suggestive lilt to the man's voice that made America's lip twitch in disgust.

"Yep," he said smoothly. "And that's done you some good, hasn't it? How's freedom taste?"

"It might taste better if I had more wealth to enjoy it with," China

replied easily, making America chuckle.

"Well, them's the bricks. Maybe if you hadn't spent so much time waving red flags, you'd be better off."

"Likely," the Chinese country admitted. "That's why I'm here."

The chink was being honest. Too honest.

Drumming his fingers on the back of the sofa, America said, "Isn't your guy coming to meet mine next month? First time a Chinese president has visited in over a decade, pretty big deal. I'm surprised you didn't want to wait until then."

China smiled. "My Jiang can handle himself. This isn't a business meeting. It's pleasure."

Still with that leading tone. America would think the guy was a queer if intel hadn't let him know he'd worked through half the women in China over the past six years. And that was just the ones his agents had heard about.

Sadly, he didn't seem to diddle kids or sleep with married women, so it was nothing the American could use. But it *did* make him suspect the other country was just trying to sketch him out right now.

"Well if that's the case, why don't I give you your present early?" Rising, America went to the nook in his wall where he kept whatever knick-knacks would best appeal or worst appeal to a guest.

Currently, he had a few bottles of alcohol, a couple war medallions (the ones for the Korean War displayed prominently), an old pipe, a picture of Nixon in China, and a turquoise and gold vase.

"Like that?" he asked as he grabbed one of the bottles, seeing China's eyes on it.

Well, he couldn't see his eyes at all, due to their chinkiness. But his head was turned in the general direction.

“I assume it’s an antique from my country?”

“Yep, from the Summer Palace, I think it was.”

China smiled. “A gift from Britain, I assume.”

“Correctamundo.” America set the bottle and two cut-crystal tulip glasses on the table.

“It’s nice that you can remain close after everything he did to you,” the foreigner said neutrally. “The taxes and such, I mean.”

America’s lips twitched, wanting to press thin. There was no way he could know about that shit.

He eased. Yeah, no way.

He sat back down, and uncapped the bottle of bourbon, filling both their glasses a finger deep.

“On the rocks?” he asked.

“Neat.”

He slid one across the low table between them, and China deftly caught it, raising it to the bright afternoon light streaming in the bay window.

“Old Forester,” America told him, putting the glass to his lips.

China did the same, and they both held their pose, waiting for the other to take the first sip.

After a second, the Chinese man caved with a laughed. “I’ll just assume you’re not going to do me the indignity of poisoning me. At least not when it would be so obvious.”

He parted his lips slightly as he sniffed the glass, then rolled the whiskey in his mouth after finally taking a sip.

America nodded in satisfaction, pleasantly surprised that he was civilized enough to know how to savour the drink properly. China

really had come a long way in the past decade and a bit. It seemed like the man himself was catching up. That he was here at all was proof of that.

If he didn't have another angle.

He took his own draught of the warm, nutty whiskey, chewing on it. "Not sure if you have American whiskey in your place, but this is the good stuff. Top of the line."

"We've had more American products, as of late." China ran his tongue over the lip of his glass, catching a drop of amber fluid, then raised his eyes to America. "I'd like more."

Internally, America smirked. It was what he'd offered the chink years ago, back in '51- money, status, economic power. He'd refused, saying some shit about China's businesses belonging to China.

But here he came, just like Vietnam. There was no CCCP to crawl to anymore. There was only America.

But still, he was a commie. And commies were tricky.

"Really?" the American drawled, swirling his bourbon in his glass. "I seem to recall you singing a different tune a few decades ago."

"Singing the same song gets boring after awhile," China said, setting his glass down. "Do you play chess?"

America's blink at the question was concealed by his aviators. "CCCP tell you that?"

"En. And I spotted a chessboard amongst your hoard." China tipped his head at the wall alcove. "Fancy a game?"

America considered, then shrugged. "Sure."

It had been awhile since he'd had a real challenge at the game. Since at least 1991.

And it wasn't like he could lose.

He fetched the board, setting it on the table.

It was a luxurious set, the checkered board made of gold rosewood and walnut, and the pieces each intricately carved from ebony and marble.

China picked up one of the pawns, running his thumb over the smooth black wood. “Expensive.”

“Yep,” America said cheerfully. “But I’ll admit- I got it from an Iraqi guy for free.”

He’d been a top-ranking man in the right-wing faction of the Ba’ath Party. After America’s CIA had so generously provided the names of the Iraqi Communists that needed a good eliminatin’, he’d seen fit to give their country a present. The pawns still had bloodstains on ‘em when he received it.

“Maybe one day I’ll be able to acquire a set like this.” China set the black pawn down on a square. “I’ll be black. I have a feeling you prefer white.”

America very much did.

As he set his pieces up, he asked, “So Big Red told you about our little chess games, did he?”

Their first game had been in… what? 1941? The guy had still had two eyes, at least. It had been hard for America to convince the Soviet to play, since he was stressed about the war or whatever. But in the end, the alternative had been to pace around the room while they waited for the break in the war counsel to end. And Russians couldn’t resist a good game of chess. It was genetic for them or something.

China smiled. “He told me he usually lost.”

America snorted. “He actually told you that?”

“He was an honest man. That was why he lost.”

No commie was honest. But America got what he was saying. In

the end, Big Red had been too blind to realize his best enemy had stacked his own pieces against him.

China added, “He was always too straightforward. And he always hesitated to sacrifice his pawns.”

He examined one of his, then set it down on the board, finished arranging his pieces.

“You can go first,” America graciously offered, wanting to see what kind of opening he’d make.

“How kind.” China plucked the pawn he’d just put down- the king’s pawn- from its place on the board. “E4.”

“Aggressive,” America noted, immediately seeing what he was going for. “Pawn, E5. Is it just me or am I sensing a little bit of disdain for our old pal CCCP?”

“I wasn’t exactly his biggest fan,” China said. “You may recall something called the Sino-Soviet split, and his politicians asking if you’d care if he nuked me. Pawn to F4.”

Deciding to humour him, America accepted the King’s Gambit, moving his pawn to F4 and taking his. “Yeah, but you stayed chummy with him after, didn’t you? Kept visiting his place right up until ’89.”

China laughed lightly. “And here I thought I’d done such a good job of keeping my flights covert.”

He had, usually taking a train out of his capital and choosing one of his more rural airfields to depart from.

Raising his glass, America said, “American intelligence. Best in the world. And don’t you forget it.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” China hummed. “Anyway, I thought it was smarter to remain friendly with someone whose diplomats wanted to use the atom bomb on me.” He smiled at America. “I was friendly enough with you when we met during the war in Korea, wasn’t I?”

Irritation tightened America's jaw. He had known the bastard remembered that day.

"And I'll admit, I bore a slight affection for the man himself," China continued. "But I saw where things were headed, and I wanted no part of it. I don't bet on losing dogs. Minister to C4. Bishop, I believe you call it."

"Smart man," the American praised his political decision, not the chess move. "Who wants to go down with a sinking ship? But you know…"

Matching China's aggressive move, he plunked his queen down on H4, leaning over the table.

"CCCP's been dead for years. You cut contact with him even before that. And I *know* you don't have any affection for me. So what are you doing here now?"

China smiled, unaffected by the check. "Because I know the winds are changing, even more than they already have. And China needs to change with them. Why did you recognize me when you did?"

America sat back, and he nodded.

"Exactly. I told you you'd have no choice but to one day. And now *I* have no choice but to go where the wind blows." He placed his king on F1. "I bore no affection for you because you refused to accept my claim on my country. And now you have."

China sat back, his hands folded neatly in his lap. "The century is turning. If I want to remain relevant, China needs to turn with it. I'm here because I want to sweep away old grudges."

"Yeah?" America examined the board with an eye. "And what about your little commie pal?"

The other man paused, like he was trying to think of who he meant. "North Korea?"

"I'm supposed to expect you'd just kick him aside after all you did to help him conquer South Korea before?"

China chuckled. “Perhaps even the best intelligence in the world doesn’t know everything. I haven’t spoken to North Korea since about 1989.”

North Korea and China’s personal communications had proven impossible for America to crack so far, but he did know that the secret planes and trains that had used to go back and forth between their countries at least twice every year had halted in that very same one.

“It was my country that helped him out back then,” China said. “Not me.”

America’s jaw feathered. “I know you were there.”

All these years and he’d never been able to prove it. But he *knew*.

China’s expression didn’t waver. “Even if I was, could you really blame me for wanting to secure my backyard? You were doing the same. Even if yours was slightly more… expansive.”

“You’re still sending him food aid.”

“So are you.”

It was different. America did it because it looked good. He was extending a hand to help those poor starving commies, even after everything North Korea had done to him.

And most of it never got to its destination. All the stuff from him and South got caught up in the embargo and sanctions. The stuff that did get through wasn’t enough to matter. He’d still get what he wanted.

But China’s supplies could be snuck over, and he’d flouted the restrictions a few times. He couldn’t make enough of a difference to count. But he *was* doing it.

“I may not have been to war with him, but I do know him,” China said. “North Korea is greedy. It’s in my best interest to keep him sated.”

America could accept that. All of the chink's help during the Korean War hadn't stopped North from going after him when it came to criticizing his foreign policy, just like he'd done to CCCP. The Nork was the type to bite the hand that fed.

China tapped a slim finger on his chin. "Though I don't suppose I'll have to worry about that much longer. I doubt he has more than a few years left in him."

"Harsh." America mock-winced, though it was true.

With his biggest trading partner gone, and the world turning away from Communism, the little countries falling back into America's pocket, North was rapidly becoming isolated. There was no one to trade with, no one to give aid. Couple that with the natural disasters and famine that slammed the country the same year his 'Grorious Reader' died, and he was looking at collapse before the big 2000. He had even asked to take out loans from the IMF like his brother, which meant he knew it, too.

America hadn't let it happen, of course. Sure, he could make demands that the Nork liberalized his economy in exchange for the cash, and save a few gooks in the process. But he didn't want North Korea liberal.

He wanted him *gone.* He wanted his perfect, unified Korea, with North's ruthlessness and South's pliability.

North Korea's pride was broken. His country would come next. The American wasn't letting anything stop or slow that.

North and all his people needed to pay for the Korean War.

China shrugged lazily. "It's the truth. Why do you think I recognized your South? Are you going to make your move?"

Placing his pawn on B5, America said, "So, you're turning over a new leaf then. Glad to hear it, if true."

"Intriguing move," China noted, examining the board. "Am I heading into a trap?"

“Am I?” America asked as the foreigner used his bishop to claim the pawn he’d just moved.

China arched a brow. “Do you really think I have the resources to trap you?”

No. But then again, America also hadn’t thought he’d had the resources to force a stalemate in Korea. And that still burned to admit.

“I don’t hate you, America,” China said, watching him move his marble knight to F6. “I actually think we’re a lot alike.”

America’s cheek ticced in disgust at the thought that the greatest country in the history of the world was anything like some backwater Third Worlder that still didn't have proper plumbing.

“Is that right?”

“En.” China moved his own knight to F3, smiling at him. “We both want the same thing- prosperity.”

America snorted. “Yet you’re a Communist.”

“I allied with the Communists because I thought they had the greatest chance of making me prosperous. So far I’ve been disappointed.”

Pulling his queen back to H6 in defense against China’s knight, America bobbed his head. “That’ll happen. So you want me to let you into the club?”

He hid his desire at the thought. Already China was a huge supply of cheap labour and resources. If he could crack him open even further-

“No,” China said, smiling. “I want to run the club.”

America paused. “What are you saying?”

“I told you we’re alike,” China said airily. “I’m not like Britain or Japan, satisfied with wealth that someone else holds the strings to.

Though I suppose Japan's fallen on hard times, hasn't he? Oops, 'she.'"

He leaned forward, not looking at the board as he moved another pawn to D3, boring past America's aviators and into his eyes with his own slitted ones.

"I want what you want," he purred, his voice dulcet. *"Power."*

America's nails dug into his knee.

He *knew* it. Hadn't he told Truman? Hadn't he told Acheson and South and the UN and every single person that had wanted to recognize China?

Even without the Soviet pulling the strings, even if he wasn't a commie, he was *dangerous.* He wanted to rule the world, to steal America's destiny away from him, just like the CCCP and North Korea and every single other Red out there.

They should have listened to him and MacArthur. America should have dropped the atom bomb on him when he had the chance.

"Oh yeah?" he said, keeping his voice neutral as he placed his second knight protectively in front of his queen. "And how do you expect to get that?"

China continued smiling, like he hadn't just said he wanted to usurp the entire natural order of things. "With a game."

His ebony knight slid to H4, facing off against America's.

"I have a proposition."

He paused, until the tension coiling in America's stomach made him say, "Let's hear it."

"The world is falling at your feet," China said correctly. "As it happens, you're going to start looking at the last bastions as fortresses that need to be torn down. I assume you'll just let Korea take care of itself, and Russia's being amicable enough for now. Europe, South America, and most of Africa have fallen into line.

Which means your next targets should be Libya, Sudan, Iraq. And a few others, I'm sure."

Maybe he expected America to react as he calmly listed the exact countries he planned to do something about soon. But he just kept the small, slightly amused smirk on his face.

China's lips curved higher. "Maybe you'll even try for me again?"

America raised a brow as he moved his queen out to G5. "Did I try for you before?"

"Let's not play coy," China hummed. "I know who filled the pockets of those protestors in 1989."

"You sure they didn't just want freedom?"

"I'm sure they didn't want to strip my soldiers naked and burn them alive," China said silkily. "No hard feelings, of course. It's just how the game is played."

"And how are we playing *this* game?" America nodded to the board, where his pieces were poised to take one of China's in a few moves. "What are giving up? Bishop or knight?"

"Do I have to give one up?" China asked, moving his knight safely to F5.

America moved his pawn to C6, towards the bishop he'd left open. "Sacrifices are how you win."

"Trust me, China is used to sacrifices." A black pawn moved towards one of America's knights, landing on G4. "I'm no CCCP."

"On that, we can agree." The knight retreated to F6.

"I'm not going to fall like him, either." China picked up his rook, holding it over the board as he looked at America. "Wars of conquest are starting to look barbaric in this civilized age. I doubt you want to challenge me directly. If I were to guess, your plans involve stoking separatists in Xinjiang and Hong Kong to do your work for you. You'll funnel in weapons and funds, pick a few

mouthpieces to direct any genuine complaints into a demand for a total overthrow, and perhaps even orchestrate a few terrorist actions."

America took a swig of whiskey.

"Either they'll succeed, and I'll lose pieces of myself, or I'll succeed at crushing them, and be labelled a violent dictatorship," China continued, voice as easy as if he was talking about dinner plans. "You'll slap another embargo on me, maybe add some sanctions. Perhaps you'll even get to carry out your blockade plan. I'll be poor, my people will go back to starving, and I might even get some burn scars, if you get to carry out your lifelong dream of striking my industry centers. Either way-"

The rook came down a tile over from its starting position with finality.

"China will fall."

He tipped his head at America. "Does that sound about right?"

Too damn right. It was like he'd read the Xinjiang playbook himself.

Poker-faced, America said, "I think your intelligence is lying to ya. You really think I'd do something like that?" He laid a hand over his chest. "I'm hurt. And so's your bishop."

He claimed it with his pawn, swiping it from the board.

"Don't worry, your secrets are safe," China hummed. "It's just my common sense speaking. And observances from the 1989 protest. And once again, no hard feelings once those predictions start coming true. Pawn to H4."

"Let's say that did happen," America said, considering the board. "It sounds like you *are* going to fall like Big Red then."

"And so comes my proposition." China spread his hands. "Don't."

The word startled a laugh from America. "Wow," he said. "Colour

me impressed- you're a persuasive one."

"I humbly accept the compliment," China thanked like he'd meant it. "Of course, I'm not asking you to stop funding my separatists or give up on your plans entirely. That wouldn't be very sporting. I'm just asking you to put a hold on the war."

America's queen moved to G6. "A hold?"

"Ten years." China held up his nearest pawn. "Ten years where no matter what happens, your bombs don't touch my country. You can lie about me, sanction me, urge my radicals to violence and use them kill. You can do whatever you want to me and mine."

The pawn came down on H5. "So long as American boots don't touch my soil, American ships don't encircle my shores, and American planes don't darken my skies."

America smirked. "Now who's afraid?" he mocked, echoing back to their conversation at China's trial years ago.

"Me," China admitted. "I'm confident in my ability to put down terrorists and soothe unrest. I'm not so confident that I can withstand an invasion without allies. CCCP is gone, Russia is occupied with his own issues, and North Korea is as useless to me as he's ever been. So I ask for a grace period. Ten years to grow my economy and make China strong."

America snorted incredulously. "You realize you just told me you want to take over the world, and now you're asking for time to get powerful enough to do it?"

"En."

Intrigued despite himself, the American asked, "And what would *I* get out of that?"

China's smile widened. "Entertainment."

America felt a spark in his chest at the word, but kept his voice even. "You think you can entertain me?"

“I know I can.” The Chinese country tipped his head. “You’re bored, aren’t you? CCCP is dead, the anti-imperialist bloc is crumbling as we speak, and you no longer have to make concessions with your own people or anyone else. The world is almost yours.

“And it bores you to no end.”

It did. The only country that had ever truly been able to challenge him was gone. The evil was vanquished, and the hero had came out victorious. He didn’t have to think about whether orchestrating an invasion of Haiti or funding the Rwandan genocide would get Big Red knocking on his door with nukes. He didn’t have to spread out his wellfare net and throw treats at the little people to keep them believing he was the better option. There *were* no options anymore.

There was only America.

But what was a hero without a villain to face? Bored, that’s what.

China smiled like he was reading his mind, then said something that made America think he was.

“Make *me* your villain,” he said, eyes opening a slight crack as he leaned over the chessboard, overhead lights glinting off their white surfaces. “Make *me* your antagonist, and I’ll make sure you're never bored again.”

America shook his head disbelievingly. “Y’know, I almost believe you actually want that.”

“I do,” China said fervently, more emotion in his voice than since he had arrived.

“You seriously want to make an enemy of the most powerful nation in the world?” America checked.

“I want to win.” China’s teeth flashed. “And you can’t win if you don’t play.”

America’s jaw worked. “Queen to G5.”

“Queen to F3.”

Saving his queen from the trap, the American said, “Knight to G8.”

“Minister to F4.” China snatched the claimed pawn up, continuing to threaten his queen.

“Queen to F6.”

“Knight to C3. You’re keeping your pieces close.”

“Bishop to C5. And you’re about to lose more of yours.”

“Knight to D5.”

“Queen takes your knight at B2.”

China smiled as his piece was claimed. “Minister to D6.”

“Queen takes your rook at A1. Check.”

America’s pieces were still undeployed on his side, only his queen behind enemy ranks, while China’s were spreading across the board, leaving him open to attack. He'd practically let him capture his bishop, pawn, and rook. He was down more pieces than America, with more vulnerable.

Still, he said, “King to E2,” leaving room for America to make his bishop leap across the board, taking the last of his rooks at G1.

China paid no attention to the army bearing down on his king. “Pawn to E5. So?”

America’s knight went to A6. “So you want ten years where I can do whatever I want, except for dropping a bomb on you, and in return I get a rival?”

“And my knight gets your pawn at G7.” It disappeared from the board. “Of course, I’m not just going to roll over and let you have your way with me. That wouldn’t be very much fun for either of us, would it? Check, by the way.”

Drumming his fingers on the table, America said, “King to D8.

“Queen to F6. Check. Again.”

America shook his head, taking his knight, using it to capture China’s queen, leaving him with pretty much only pawns. The guy thought he was so-

He froze, eyes darting over the board.

‘Shit.’ He’d been so distracted thinking about the insane proposition and looking for snares in it that he hadn’t seen what China was setting up right in front of him.

China stood, his smile arrogant enough that America was tempted to jump over the set and wipe it off his face.

The Chinese country made his way over to his side of the table, placing himself between his legs, forcing America to lean back and tip his head up to meet his gaze.

“Ten years,” he said, bracing his palms deliberately against the back of the sofa on either side of America’s head, leaning down into his space.

His eyes opened wide for the first time since he’d got there, slender and brimming with an unchecked ambition that made America’s pulse kick up against his will.

China’s lips curled up further. “Give me ten years and I promise I’ll put on a show for you that CCCP *never* could.”

A heat kindled in America’s stomach, burning through the apathy that had been growing inside him like a layer of soot. The same heat he'd felt as he scalped Indians and took their lands for his own, the same one that had burned in him as he turned against Britain, the same that flared when he had made the old man realize that *he* was the one in charge now. The same one he’d felt every time he faced off against CCCP. The fire he hadn't felt in years.

He'd been so bored lately. Nothing was enough to fix it. Not sex, not visiting Guantanamo, not planning his next move for his

destiny. Last month he'd gone too far with a chick he'd only been dating for half a year, hoping that each hit would be what it took to break through the growing numbness, searching and searching for that spark until all he had left was a mangled corpse and he was still so goddamn *bored.*

But China had just made him feel something he hadn't felt since he'd received the news about CCCP's dissolution.

Excitement.

"Deal," he said, standing up, making China have to lean back, though he refused to back down, keeping them face-to-face and reminding the American that the Asian was somehow barely shorter than him.

Unintimidated by how close they were, the other man smiled as he offered his hand to the few inches of space between them. America shook it, grinding his bones in his.

China didn't flinch. His voice was low and silky as he purred, "I'm looking forward to it."

His eyes slid closed again, and he glided back to his side of the table, sitting. America watched the board, tense.

Not even looking at his pieces, still smiling up at him, China reached out, taking his bishop in hand.

And moved it back to E5.

America's tension eased, but he remained wary as he sat back down, using the chance to get his pieces into a defensive position.

For the next minute they only spoke to call out their moves. And in only a few of them, America had checkmated China.

"Aiya," the other country said, not sounding very bothered. "I lost. Good game."

With narrowed eyes, America returned, "Good game."

China stood, looking like the cat that got the canary, even though he'd lost the first match of the *real* game. "Well, I suppose we've both accomplished what we wanted. I should get going before rumours start to fly."

They were going to. Of course America was going to use the Chinese Countryhuman paying him a personal visit as a sign to the rest of the world that even he was conceding to him.

Even if that wasn't as true as he'd thought just this morning.

"I can take this?" China didn't wait for an answer, taking the bottle of bourbon from the table. "Many thanks. If you ever visit my country, I'll have to think of something of equal value for you."

"I'm looking forward to it." America had no intention of entering enemy territory. Even if the Countryhuman was smart enough to see where the wind was sweeping him, it didn't mean his masses were. "Feel free to see yourself out."

"Wouldn't want anyone to think we're equals, would you?" China lilted.

America lifted his glasses to wink. "Consider it a sign of trust."

With a knowing smile, China dipped his head, then he went for the door.

America tapped his foot. He didn't want to look desperate for asking, but…

"Why didn't you make the last move?"

China looked over his shoulder. "Beg pardon?"

"The chess match." America gestured at the board. "You can't tell me you didn't notice you had a perfect Immortal Game set up. All ya had to do was move your bishop to E7, and it would've been checkmate for me."

China tipped his head, smiling. "I'm bored of clichés, aren't you?"

Without another word, he swept out of the room.

America watched the door for a long while, then shook his head.

The guy might not be a commie anymore. But he was still batshit crazy.

He'd got some good material at least. Nothing too incriminating, but the stuff about North had been good. He couldn't wait to show him. It didn't really serve a political purpose (it wasn't like the guy could risk cutting off Chinese aid, unless he wanted more of his people to starve, and America knew he wouldn't). But it would be satisfying to see his face as he realized that not even the chink that had went to war for him was on his side anymore.

Once he truly knew he was alone, then he would break, just like America had wanted all those years ago.

America smirked, reaching under the table. He'd have to find some way to show him in person, maybe lure him to a UN meeting with the promise of-

His fingers touched bare wood, and he frowned, feeling around. Then he got down on his knees, peering under the table.

Nothing. Just smooth oak wood.

He sat up, looking over at where China had been sitting.

In the lineup of his claimed chess pieces was a small crushed case of hard plastic. America snatched it up, finding that the chip inside was missing. Looking around frantically confirmed it was gone. It looked like the bastard had stolen a pawn from the board, too, the one he'd used to maneuver America's pieces into the checkmate he hadn't taken.

The ruined listening device crumpled further in America's hand as he stared at the door the foreigner had left through, anger sparking inside him.

Then he laughed, flinging himself back onto the sofa and draining the rest of his whiskey.

Maybe the chink wouldn't be boring after all. Maybe he really would give him a chance. America didn't completely buy that he wasn't a commie anymore, but you know? He *was* buying that he could be fun. And even if he wasn't, this just gave him more opportunities to exploit his labour and consumer force. He'd make America money, and America would get at least a little relief from the restless boredom buzzing under his skin. It was win-win. For him, anyway.

And really, who else was there to be his villain? North was on his way to join CCCP, and while Russia had shown a bit of spark when he'd met him after his father's death, he was just a kid, and the Soviet's kid through and through. It could be amusing to wave a red flag (pun intended) and watch him charge like a bull, but it had diminishing returns. And all the small fry in the Middle East were just bit players.

But China… Remembering the 1951 trial, America nodded. He'd been pissed at being checkmated back then, but he had to admit- it had been a helluva performance.

China really could be just what he was looking for.

And it wasn't like he had to hold to the deal. If he did turn out to be a touch too Red, America could just take him out anyway.

He nodded, satisfied, as he swept the chess pieces into his hand.

Ten years.

What could be the harm?

—

China stepped back onto his plane, shutting himself away in his private compartment as it started down the runway.

Even when alone, the smile he'd worn for the past eight years didn't waver. His mind didn't wander over the words he'd had to speak, only what they had attained him.

Ten years. His much-needed grace period. It came at a high cost,

but like he had told America, he was used to sacrifice. Chess pieces, land, soldiers, civilians, comrades, his best friend. Himself. There was nothing he wouldn't give for what he wanted.

And he had got what he wanted. His admitted fear of America had lowered the man's guard enough to let the promise of a future antagonist sway him. And now that the country didn't plan to bomb him, he would be less wary about exporting his industry to him.

He wondered what-

No, he knew. And it didn't matter what anyone he had once known would think. All that mattered was that he *won*.

He was selling out his people. He was selling out their safety and livelihoods, trading their security for a larger economy, trading their bodies for foreign capital.

He had done it years ago. And that didn't matter either.

His country needed to be too tempting to ignore. A leash worked both ways. And China knew he would one day need this one if he wanted to save them all.

He crushed the thought that flickered through his mind, that maybe now that his deal had been accepted he could make contact again.

He couldn't. He knew America hadn't completely bought that he wasn't a Communist anymore. His mask was perfect, but the man had steeped in paranoia for so long, he could never trust him. China knew the type. So long as his country was Socialist, he would always be suspect. The deal would always be fragile.

If he wanted to play this game, he had to walk the line.

His friend would be okay. He might have feared for anyone else, but he knew he could withstand this. Even alone.

He only feared he had lost the right to know him again once he did.

The Chinese country ran his thumb over the ebony pawn in his hand, feeling the chip in it, the slightest imperfection in the expensive lacquer that he could never afford to show.

'Forgive me,' he said to everyone and no one, still smiling.

Ten years.

China had to make it count.

FULL DISCLOSURE. I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO PLAY CHESS. I LOOK AT CHESS BOARD AND MY HEAD STARTS SPINNING AND TEARS COME TO MY EYES UNBIDDEN. So this match is copied to the letter from Dragon Age- I mean, uh, the Immortal Game from 1851. Yes, the classical chess match and not my video game boyfriend playing mind chess with the former secret police agent with horns.

I like to think that when China finally started hanging out with North and Russia at UN meetings again, he had some sort of conversation with America, then once he came back over, Russia bluntly asked, 'Why do you have sexual tension with America?' and North looked at him like this: (×△･)

Random Drawings And Genocide In Sudan

[image] [image]

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More redraws from suggestions and 4shiro's Pinterest board!

NK-pop Demon Hunters. Hae likes cute pyjamas, SH likes full-clothing pyjamas, and South Pyongan is a tank top and boxers woman.

The only reason this isn't canon is because China wouldn't want to infringe on North's autonomy by making him a cookie. Guy whose respect for boundaries is impenetrable to the normal human mind.

Both flag version, please don't look at Canada's maple leaf too closely.

South Pyongan at a discussion on what to do about a Party member caught taking bribes (she has a suggestion).

Can I come to war with you and stare at you like this?

Liberals when they see photos of buildings in China or the DPRK on Google Earth: 'Oh my God!! That's a concentration camp! There must be millions of people being tortured in there! You can't see them, but I know it!'

Liberals when they see photos of blood stains and piles of bodies so large they can be seen from satellites in Sudan from a genocide being funded and supplied by the United Arab Emirates, which is in turn funded militarily by the US, and is supported by Israel: 'Okay, but that's in Africa. Africa is just like that.'

There have been genocides going on in the Congo and Sudan for years, and you don't hear a fucking *peep* from Western media. And it is, like almost always, because of capitalism. The UAE wants Sudan's gold and position in the region, and the US and its allies need the DRC's metals to make their endless stream of technology. Microsoft and other Western companies *know* that their resources are being mined by children and slaves and they don't care because it means they get to buy shit cheap so they can sell it expensive. *Do not buy Dubai chocolate*- you are buying chocolate made by slaves and your money is going towards piles of dead bodies and raped women and children in Sudan. Do not buy the newest phone or computer- if yours works, you don't need a new one. China's phones are more ethical because they don't have child labour mines, and the DRC has actually praised them for their efforts in the region, but you still don't need a new one every year. Your need to be trendy is not worth a Congolese person's suffering. Be annoying about this because it is *worth* being annoying about. If you have a friend that wants to go to McDonald's or shop on Amazon, tell them that makes them responsible for dead Palestinians and Congolese people. Because it does. 'No ethical consumption under capitalism' is about *necessities,* not bread and circuses. We can't fix these things directly but we don't have to contribute to them.

October Revolution... But Sexy

[image] [image] [image] [image]
[image]

I'm sorry in advance.

I was late for the anniversary because I was drawing this. Shameful. But I grew brave enough to draw CCCP with body hair, even though I hate it.

It's canon that CCCP got used as a model in the late 70s, early 80s. He has no idea why anyone would be interested in him in a swimsuit. He sees all of his people as his children so he has no inclination to think any of them would be attracted to him. The Ministry of Culture does not share this blindness. Sometimes the best thing for public opinion is a man with a dad body. Be safe

when you walk the streets, old man.

Also if you think I'm exaggerating Soviet swimsuits, take a look at this guy.

You can't see the front of that swimsuit, but I think the back says enough. Perhaps too much, one could say.

Women In Suits

[image] [image]

Working women.

And not.
Actually she is. Japan/Nipponia is a salaryman trapped in a 16/20 year old's body.

South Pyongan is still not comfortable in a suit, but she does wear it well. But drawing Hae in black doesn't feel right. She's definitely a choson-ot for meetings woman. SH is choson-ot for mass meetings, suit for private. South Pyongan is 'Do I *have* to wear a suit?' 'Your only other option is the choson-ot.' '*sigh* I'll wear the suit.'

Go listen to Old Religion by Florence and the Machine RIGHT NOW. North song. I cried listening to it.
Also Elizabeth Taylor (the only song I like on the new Miss Swift album) is a China song, but to a lesser degree.

I have been very productive. I wrote four chapters for Chasing Liberty, made many pictures, got life work done, and made milk bread with condensed milk. And I even edited... the chapter. He. Ehehehehehehehe.

The Atrocities In Question

[image]
[image]

Tangentially related pictures. If you're wondering why all North's fingers are bruised, it's because they were stomped on so he couldn't punch guards anymore.

Reading Warring Pyongyang should be an experience of 'I think the North Koreans are treating Japan sort of unfairly, I mean it wasn't *her* that did that stuff.' And then reading Chasing Liberty should impart 'Ohhhh. Wow, she's lucky North didn't just shoot her dead. Or lock her in the air raid shelter and beat her daily.' Sort of the thought process for people that didn't know learning the history between the real countries.

I don't think Y/N will ever know the true extent of what Japan did to North. He never would have told her how closely their personal situations related because that would have been 'weakening' himself in her eyes (no he doesn't think she's weak for what she went through, he actually thinks she's strong, but why would that apply to him? No he doesn't think *any* abuse victim is weak for what is done to them, but he is *not* a victim and he was too weak to stop it, case closed (facetious tone here, to be clear). And if he's weak, she won't think he can protect her. Just like how the provinces don't even know everything he went through. Kangwon is the closest as he's the only one that's ever seen North naked before, and it was before he'd been able to pick up any scars from their war, so he knew they all came from Japan. But North hates that.
South also didn't tell anyone else about those years after he told America, because he regretted how he used it against him. So he was also tight-lipped about it.
tone-deaf attempt at flirting 'Soooo the government says you were locked up by Japan for years. What was that like?'
'Oh, it was crazy, you know. He kept me locked up in a room the entire time. It was *so* boring. Anyway, have you heard my new song yet?'

But South also wanted to tell someone that would care and comfort him (which is why he told America)(bad choice), so there is a chance Korea could slip up with Y/N. I just don't think it would ever be anything in-depth because North really *really* never wants to talk about it or think about it ever again. Plus now there's this added layer of not wanting to tell her about South's memories, since that would bring up the whole 'wait, North left him?' thing, which is 1) something that is very effective at making his two halves clash, and 2) not something he wants to tell her about in any detail. Both because it's uncomfortable for him and also because it brings up 'I left him because there are more important things.' Which could make Y/N question if there are more important things than *her*. There are, as much as he wishes she could be the most important to him, he is Korea, his people and country always come first, and in the end he wouldn't trade that for anything; Y/N accepts this, she understands there are sacrifices you have to make when you love someone that isn't only human. But he doesn't want to hurt her by making her think about it.
Deep down North/Korea wants some sort of comfort for everything, but he doesn't want to have to divulge any details. He wants someone to just understand intrinsically without having to be told. And Y/N comes as close to this as possible, just like she feels he came close to understanding her even before he knew everything.

Also because I didn't put it plainly that one chapter, I updated the 'Intimacy' chapter of Safeway Pyongyang to add a longer lead-up, some character moments, a little bit of North lore that China would kill for, and Y/N being the freak she is. Iffff you want to read it. You can stop before the actual sex scene
thoughIupdatedthattoreinforcethatNorthisabottom-

What was that?!

...

Must have been the wind. *sheathes sword and clips through wall*

Oiled Up

[image] [image] [image][image]

I'm working on Chasing Liberty chapters, but I have a cold, which means I can't think right. So I'm waiting to post them until my head clears. In the meantime, answering all of the petitions hounding me.

First! Belgium asking North for 'fries' from the 'frittur.'

Second! America (grudgingly). And while there was no petition for Canada, I know a couple of you (you know who) always want more Canada.

This happens about eight times every year. Also clarifying because there are FREAKS out there, he's blushing because he's flustered at being told he's actually someone's favourite. Canada is the type to go pure red if an old lady calls him a handsome young man.

Also a random lore drop- I'm changing the reason for Canada having his mental break. It makes sense for it to be over the Palestinian genocide. Because Canada does want to be a good person, he's just a spineless liberal who doesn't understand *how* to be one. So he's very much horrified by what Israel is doing, but doesn't have enough courage to stand up against his government. He tells himself people protesting it is enough, and that he can't really do anything about it anyway (like he always tells himself). But he's stuck in this uneasy state where he's seeing just how against the genocide so many people are, while his government never listens (and he's also maybe drawing comparisons about how he was created). And he knows the reason his government doesn't listen is because America doesn't want them to. He's under no delusions about whose policy his country follows, he's just never really had a problem with it before because he and America 'want the same things.' And even if they don't, his brother is still better than the alternative- being under China/Russia/ambiguous Middle Eastern control. He can't comprehend a world where countries are equals, and he *isn't* under someone's control. He's still Britain's, and Britain is America's, and so is he. In this case, he assumes America

is also personally against Israel, and is just following his government's line and 'not intervening, like always' (though Canada knows he's probably lying to himself about this). So when he goes to America and is like 'Hey, I think you should stand up against Israel (so I can stand up against Israel),' and America is like '?? Why would I do that? He's doing good work.' it shakes Canada very badly. Because despite everything, he does harbour this delusion that America is a good person. So he returns home sort of stunned and thinking 'Well, if America supports him, then I guess it's really for the best...' But it keeps rubbing at him, and on top of that, Ukraina supports Israel, which is shocking to him because he has the liberal mindset of 'Ukraina and Palestine are in the same position' (they're not). And while Ukraina *personally* doesn't like Israel, in order to keep getting his support in her war, and America's money, she says that she hardline does. And she supports him either way. So the two closest people to Canada support Israel, his father supports Israel (in his tired 'let your brother have his Middle Eastern bloodsport' way), and his government supports Israel. So it should be the right thing for him to do it, too. But that clashes with what he sees online and how his masses stand with Palestine. Canada also wants to do right by his Indigenous people for what the old Canadas did to them and what he allowed to be done to them (he's just as complicit, he just doesn't see it that way). And he's realizing that he's doing the exact same thing he did with the residential schools and going 'well, it must be for the best. And even if it's not, there's nothing I can do about it. Just keep rubber-stamping.' But he wanted to change from that. He said he would. And his government said they'd changed, too. But here they are supporting another genocide. I like to think China has something to do with his breaking point because he's more active behind the scenes than people assume. He mentions something 'off-hand' about what's being done to Palestine at a UN meeting where America vetoes another ceasefire attempt, and Canada goes home and actually makes himself watch news reports and fully confront the horror of what he's supporting. And he finally snaps and goes to confront America, intending to tell him that he's done and he's going to publicly declare that he doesn't support Israel and that America is complicit in his genocide. And he really shouldn't have gone to America, but he's still harbouring some hope- 'Israel is committing genocide just like you (we) did. But you're better than

that now, you (we) didn't know any better. You've (we've) changed, you're (we're) good people, tell me you're with me on this, tell me my brother is a good person.' But America just doubles down and pulls out every trick in the book- 'You're *really* saying we were built on genocide? We won, fair and square, you're dishonouring our brave settlers, it was in the past, let it go, this is nothing like that, your people are pinkos and their self-hate is rubbing off on you, Israel is a white, God-fearing nation like us, his people belong there, they're just taking back what was promised to them, the rest of the civilized world supports him, yeah he's a little harsh, but he's just defending himself from the Other. When everyone else around you supports something, and you're the only one that doesn't, what do ya think that means?' Then when Canada's wavering, he pulls out the fake concern. 'You're sick, 'Nada. Ukraina's been telling me about your anxiety. You're having a mental break. I'm worried about you. But I know how we can make you better.' And since he was obviously prepared for this because Ukraina told him what Canada was planning, and was ready the second Canada said he was paying an emergency visit, Israel steps in from the hall. And he's just a polite guy in a doctor's coat, who smiles and says his people are used to being ostracized, so there's no hard feelings (the typical Zionist thing of 'all Jewish people think like us, and you don't know anything about the Nakba, but you *do* know about the Holocaust. Remember that? You're being anti-Semitic by being against Israel'). He's seen cases like this in former hostages (he's seen cases like this in Israeli soldiers wracked with guilt and questioning everything they've ever been told before they kill themselves). America had him write him up a prescription. If he just takes these pills, he'll be better. And Canada is a settler state. He's never had to stand up for himself or fight for what he believes in. He has no personal backbone or trust in himself. And how can someone that smiles and speaks calmly to you actually be a bad person? And he knows when America won't let him leave until he does what he wants. So he takes the pills (too many), and goes home. And it still doesn't feel right to hear Ukraina complain about Russia 'gencociding' her people, then say she supports Israel, or to hear that his government is selling more weapons to Israel, or that America just vetoed another ceasefire proposal. But it must be right, and even if it isn't, there's nothing he can do anyway. So he takes more pills so he doesn't have to think about it anymore. He can just

bury his head in the sand while people die because he has the privilege to do that. But the guilt still tears him apart.

Anyway, what we've all been waiting for- oiled-up Ryanggang!

This is what was meant, I assume.

Habits

[image] [image] [image] [image][image]

Relax man, no one's trying to- Um, actually, maybe hold a bit tighter.

North and his gyeongdan. <3 (NOT for eating). A base from 4shiro's Pinterest was used (thank you!)

The Ganghwa trio (still can't draw humans, but I love them) I referenced a spotted seal for Ahn Chun-hui. You read North Pyongan's POV and think 'Surely he's just comparing her to a seal because he's obsessed with the ocean.' But then you see her and think 'Wow... What a seal-like young woman.' Her and Han-jin are cousins, believe it or not. Her mother is his father's sister. We're pretending she lived a long happy life and nothing bad ever happened to any of them. (but Kim Kang-sim is still dead because he is awful)

I've also drawn my Elanna, if you don't mind. *stares at you with her big black eyes and asks invasive questions*

And Alyna. Don't worry about her. She's fine. Well, she's rotting into a horrific perversion of the natural order. But she was already sort of that inside.

I love thinking of little details about my characters' lives, so I'm going to put the Koreans' sort of usual routines here.

North and the Northern provinces have very regimented lives since they're heavily involved in running their country. They don't have much free time, and most of it is usually used for staying fit, expanding thier knowledge, or connecting with their people. Most countries have their provinces live separately from them and just live their own lives, but Socialist countries tend to keep them close to promote a sense of cohesion and family, coordinate governance, and protect them from sabotage. North especially does this as he's very protective, so usually his provinces stay in the high-rise.

The high-rise has six floors. Floor one is dining room, lobby, kitchen (+air raid shelter); floor two is spare office for meetings, library (large), small toilet, supply closet; third floor is medical bay (for personal injuries or wartime scenarios, and Kangwon's disturbingly large supply of their blood because he doesn't want to scare any nurses with the sheer volume they have), and another toilet; fourth floor is ~~for the Southern provinces~~ for guest bedrooms and another toilet; fifth floor is for the Northern provinces and a large bathing room and small toilet (increased number of toilets, decreased number of incidents ending in violence); and sixth floor is North's office and bedroom. I think I'm also going to add a door on the fifth floor that goes to a rooftop garden for vegetables and fruits, plus future solar panels. Ryanggang would take care of it when he's home, and either staff or North would if he wasn't. The reason the electricity is faulty in the high-rise is because they have a separate grid from the city in case of cyber attacks. Solar panels would help mitigate this. And the DPRK also encourages rooftop gardens, so it makes sense for them to have one, even if they're sometimes too busy to tend it.

When everyone is at the high-rise, North has the cooks make breakfast and dinner, and lunch is on the provinces to get, whether they go out, cook, or skip it. It's only for Y/N's sake that he had them cook three meals a day. When the provinces are in their own capitals, all meals are up to them. And when North is alone, he lets the cooks have a paid day off.

North doesn't really like having staff, both for privacy reasons and because he's someone that doesn't like having others do things for him. It was only after they moved into the high-rise that the provinces managed to convince him, since it was so large that daily cleaning isn't as feasible as with a chosonjip. And he finally caved on cooks because 1) it takes up too much time they could be using to work if they have to cook breakfast and dinner; 2) it always completely destroyed the kitchen to have nine people cooking at once; 3) it's easier to get away with skipping meals for him, and to make sure the provinces don't; and 4) he admitted to himself that they won't be getting South Gyeongsang (the only one that can cook; has taken on a semi-deified glow in their memories) back anytime soon.

For cleaning, staff clean the high-rise once a week when circumstances are normal, but the provinces are responsible for cleaning their rooms. North tries to make sure they all deep-clean the high-rise themselves once or twice a year, usually in spring or before winter. It builds character (the wars and famine wasn't enough). Laundry is done on Friday, and if you want something cleaned before then, you have to do it yourself. If someone (South Pyongan) needs to be punished, they have to do the all the dishes or laundry instead, and the pay for the staff comes out of their salary that week. North doesn't buy much, so he usually gives his money to SH to go grocery shopping, though everyone is encouraged to buy ingredients for the cooks.

North is the only one who cleans the top floor. They're not allowed to bring government materials home, so it's not so much an issue of classified things, but he does have personal items, mostly pictures and letters, that he doesn't want anyone to see, and is also just a private, paranoid person. He deep-cleans it once a week, and if he doesn't have time he makes sure he does next week.

South also has his penthouse deep-cleaned once a week (by staff). He and North are both very averse to filth. They floss and brush very often, and South showers every day, while North showers every other day (and it would be every day if it didn't waste water). While South is messy in that he'll toss his clothes on the floor, he won't wear them twice in a row, and if they're visibly dirty, he has to toss them out of sight. North can't stand mess at all, and needs all his clothes and items to be neatly arranged. It's not just military habit for him, and it's not OCD for either of them (and OCD isn't 'everything needs to be neat,' it tends to be 'everything needs to be neat or my family will die, and I need to fold this shirt five times or they'll die painfully'), it's from growing up imprisoned by Japan. They were never able to shower, wash their hands, or brush their teeth, and lived in a small dirty shack for nine years at the shortest, so they both feel the need to be clean at all times. North can turn this off when he's in soldier mode, but the moment he's out he needs to be *clean.* They also used to eat a lot of rotten food, and while this turned North into someone who will eat anything if he has to, it gave South infestation trauma. If he sees a hair or something in his food, he can't eat it, even if a fly just landed on the

rim of the bowl for one second. If he bought a bag of potatoes and one was rotten, he'd need to throw out the entire bag. But he doesn't usually cook. He also doesn't have cooks. He'll either order in or eat out, only hiring caterers for fancier parties.

When the Northern provinces are in their capitals, they clean their houses before they leave (or they're supposed to). SH, Chagang, Hae (because Korea told her to), and North Pyongan do this reliably. They all tend to eat out (the DPRK has food delivery in big cities but North has made it clear that his provinces will *not* be lazy) when they're alone. Kangwon is the exception. Number 1 Healthy Eater. Hae is genuinely not allowed to have things that create fire in her house, including a microwave, so she either has to eat out or eat raw fruits and vegetables, or snacks. When they aren't home, North usually sleeps at the Worker's Party Headquarters at his desk (technically not allowed; sometimes he has to hide under it so no one will try to convince him to leave; he will never admit to this).

The Southern provinces live permanently in their capitals, though South has room for them in Seoul ('please visit please visit please-'). Their lives are more relaxed than the Northerners, not having as involved government jobs, though some have less freedom in their schedules by virtue of being celebrities. SH has to wake up, eat breakfast, go to office, go do on-the-spot guidance, go back to office, free-time, do short workout, eat dinner, sleep, but she is in control of her schedule. Gyeonggi has to wake up, eat breakfast, talk with manager, practice vocals, practice dance, attend a shoot, do fanmeet, work out, eat dinner, sleep, and if he misses one of those his manager will hang him. South has a looser schedule because he has the power to say 'No, I need free-time.' It varies with all of them. Gangwon has a job, North Chungcheong has a job and union meetings, plus government stuff, the Jeollas have social media and photoshoots, Sang has orphanage visits and meals to cook, Jeju has fish to catch, South Chungcheong is getting someone sent to prison for life, and North Gyeongsang... took a picture of a nice bird yesterday. So that's something. Most of them eat out or order in, even Sang. She cooks for others, not herself. Jeju and Gangwon are the ones who cook. (they've all deified Sang, too, holidays are for convincing her to make food)

I might do these for the other countries in the future. It might be boring, but I like to think about the logistics about how Countryhuman lives would be, and vary by country. ^^

The base.

Broken Heart

[image] [image] [image]

I've been grinning like I'm winning I've been hitting my Marx.

I have... no explanation for this one. Except I Can Do It With A Broken Heart is such a good China song. It must be listened to with the view that 'he' is Mao Zedong. Except for 'I'm so obsessed with him but he avoids me like the plague.' That's just all his friends but especially North.

Also North in that one outfit of Kim Il-sung's, and Hae thrilled that they match.

Input needed!

I wrote up a China backstory while I was delirious from illness (it came to me in a fevered vision, and I'm genuinely not making this up; I was so ill I had to take a day off work which I never do, and I couldn't wake up all day, I was in a semi-conscious state hallucinating China's life). Would anyone be interested in seeing it? I'm conflicted because it explains a lot about him, and I really like it, but also I feel like that element of mystery is integral to China's character. Thoughts? If I do put it in the artbook, it won't be until towards the end of Chasing Liberty (I have a few chapters in the backlog for this because they'll be more impactful with future context). But do you want the China story, or do you prefer his enigmatic past?

Also I had a dream last night that I was captured by a South Korean soldier and I was being really annoying, and he was typing on his phone, and I looked over his shoulder to see he was translating 'I want to kick you in the head' so he could say it to me. I got so offended that I knocked him out and walked out of where I was being kept and across the road to work.

Namibia, Belgium, And Scary Fish

[image] [image] [image]

I redrew Namibia! I replaced the old drawing in the other chapter, too, but I want people to see this one. I added more jewellery to represent her major tribes. Her dress comes from one I saw on a Namibian model. She's very fashionable. ^^ There's this shell necklace called the ohumba that one of her ethnicities (the Himba) wear when they become mothers, and I like to think they gave her one. She's not a very 'motherly' person, but she wears it when she visits them.

And Belgium's full design, as requested. I like to add little traditional details to modern outfits, hence the headdress and her sort of puffy sleeves.

Also as requested, CCCP with an aberration from Dredge. I don't know what either of these things are, but they look cool. And I like the idea of him being unable to go fishing without pulling up some monstrosity from the depths.

Also I had a dream last night that I was Y/N, and at one point I was walking down the road with America having one of those really awkward conversations you wish you can escape from, but you can't. It was just small talk with my (abusive) ex, but there was that vaguely menacing undercurrent where I knew if we weren't in public, he'd be hurting me. Then later in the dream I got bit by tsuchinoko, and the guys that helped me were like 'Uwa! Tsuchinoko! So cool! You need to memorize where you got bit because people will want to know!' And I was actively bleeding.

SH But Filipina

[image] [image]

As requested, SH in Filipiniana! I hope I drew it right. ^^ They're very pretty.

POV: You're the Netherlands and decided to try and play arrogant European power with China over semiconductors, and now he's telling Namibia you had a gay hookup with Luxembourg. He's also told her what you did to Indonesia. She will use this against you.

I like to think China does this with a lot of the African countries he's friends with. When their former colonizers or current neo-colonizers try to extort them, or just deal unfairly with them, they can heavily hint that they have proof about their sordid affairs, and get a better deal. And the European countries have a *lot* of sordid affairs.

I think many colonizer countries would add 'Oh well, it was a different Countryhuman I colonized' to their list of reasons not to pay reparations. Especially since African Countryhumans have changed frequently due to European meddling, like with the scramble for Africa and how the colonizers made up borders, or Italy merging Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland, and the sheer amount of coups funded by foreign powers. Like 'Oh, you didn't exist then. Why do I have to pay reparations to you?' 'Okay, *I* didn't exist, but my people did. And they're still being negatively affected by-' 'Ah ah ah. Listen, I don't want to pay you back, so how about I fund a rebel militia to overthrow your popular government and sell your resources back to me?' 'How about you-' 'Ope! Another new Countryhuman! Now I *really* don't have to pay reparations.' The Countryhuman version of the modern day 'Well, Europe is just obviously naturally more civilized and advanced because we have all these achievements!' (ignoring that places in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were far more advanced than Europe throughout much of history, and that those European achievements couldn't have been accomplished without the blood and labour of those

people) is 'Us European countries are so civilized, look how most of us have lived for so long, while the other countries are so young and short-lived' (ignoring that the reason that's true is because they kept changing colony borders as they pleased, and whenever an African or Asian country becomes stable and prosperous, or even just wants to nationalize resources, the Europeans and America do everything they can to dissolve them)(and that the reason Italy is as old as he is is because he wasn't executed for WWII, where if he was a non-white nation, he would have been. They don't care if a non-Western country (Russia is included in this) falls into chaos with the death of its Countryhuman, but god forbid that happens to a country in Western Europe). It's the 'look how peaceful and enlightened we are, not engaging in that violence,' while being the ones responsible for it and far more.

Cramp solutions:
Exercise- great for staying, fit, but pain returns after
Ginger tea- tastes good. Doesn't really work
Chinese traditional medicine pills- effective, but expensive.
Rocking back and forth on the floor- effective, but legs fall asleep
Rocking back and forth on the floor, screaming- even more effective, but can't be done in places with thin walls
Punching myself in the stomach as hard as possible to replace the inner pain with outer- free, easy, and effective. Starts to wear off? Punch yourself again! Literally no drawbacks.

Sexual Attraction

[image] [image]

Guess which one I am.

I had a dream I was in a tall apartment bloc in the city, and the Saja Boys from K-pop Demon Hunters were trying to kill me. And they put my cat outside on a window ledge. I tried to get him but he fell maybe ten floors, and I almost woke myself up screaming. It's not real screaming, but when my body doesn't like a dream it starts internally screaming and pressure builds in my head until I wake up with my throat flexing, sometimes whining. But I didn't wake up fully this time, and fell back into the dream. There were some Genshin characters helping me fight the Saja Boys, but I didn't need them. I had an anime breakdown moment where I started howling and summoning biblical floods to destroy them. Boy band dead, I ran downstairs to see my cat. I didn't see his body, but then I saw blood on the ground that I specifically identified as 'organ blood,' so I knew he was dead, and went back to the apartment (would NEVER happen in real life I am finding my boy). At this point it switched to Countryhumans Malaysia(?) POV, who was apparently my friend. But I see Malaysia as a woman, and he was a man. And it was years later and he was scouring bars, and he found my cat, now grizzled and drinking alcohol. He'd survived the fall, but was so ashamed that he was afraid to see me again. He told Malaysia this. I want to stress that this was literally my cat, he could just talk and hold a glass and was acting like a war-weary veteran for some reason, which is not my cat's personality at all. In the end, Malaysia convinced him to come home, and I almost woke myself up again shrieking his name in happiness. Then my voice started narrating, describing how he and my other cats (that I don't own) went on to get married and have children, and we stayed together forever. Then my sister (who also doesn't exist) came in, and my own voice said something like 'My sister always quits everything else to devote herself to a plan. And here it is. POKEMON LEGENDS ZA COMING

THIS FALL.' And then I finally woke up and got to attack my cat to remind myself he's alive and didn't sleep for the rest of the night. I'm so tired, but more importantly...
Why did I get a Nintendo ad in my dream?? For a game that is already out? I would say Marx didn't predict this stage of capitalism, but he probably did.

Now more important topic.

The US is committing terrorism by bombing boats off South America. Openly. They've admitted it's hard to identify which boats are 'drug boats.' They're just striking civilian ships and murdering people. If another nation so much as hijacks an aircraft, they get sanctioned. The DPRK gets demonized for capturing an active spy ship, but America can steal an oil tanker with no issues. And they can openly kill innocent people over an issue they don't even care about. They funded the Contras, ignoring it as they smuggled cocaine into America. They channeled it into black neighbourhoods on purpose. They funded the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan, who produced opium. They worked with the Kuomintang in Myanmar to produce more opium, all of which ends up in America, amongst other places, as heroin. It was American companies that created the American opioid epidemic. They don't care about drug smuggling- they just want war with Venezuela to get their oil and eliminate another base of resistance in South America, just like they wanted to crush Communism in all those other countries.
Venezuelan fishermen have to set sail with the knowledge that at any moment they could be murdered by something they can't stop just for trying to feed their families. And the world lets it happen. This could be any of us, and even being an American puppet doesn't keep you safe, just ask women and girls in the countries with US bases. It only means other puppet nations might half-heartedly protest it. But they still won't *do* anything. And the moment your nation actually tries to change, to stop supporting this terrorism and do *something,* the protests stop and the eyes turn away, and at any moment the empire can come down and destroy your entire country without consequence. Stand with Venezuela, even if you think it has nothing to do with you. Because it *does.*

Merry Cabbage Day!

[image]

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate on this day! Have a Hae in a costume I saw in a North Korean kids Christmas choir I found online.

Disclaimer: Hae cannot sing. I am not liable for damage to your eardrums. She also can't pronounce Christmas.

My favourite thing in Kim Il-sung's speeches is how Christmas is always written 'Christmas.' 'MacArthur is touting that they'll be home by 'Christmas." I know it wasn't widely celebrated in Korea at the time, but it makes me giggle to see it talked about like something he's never heard about before when he was raised Christian. It's amusing to consider that this wasn't in the original Korean and was a purposeful choice by whoever translated his speeches into English. Whenever I say Christmas, I put finger quotes around it now.

Sensing what I'm about to do to him in Chasing Liberty, North has psychically ssstricken me with the fever. There is no other reason this could be happening after I got I city and refuse to wear coat. Authir's brains are melting out of her ears gobogobo

Sigh. Shirtless Tied Up Man For Christmas

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Merry REAL Christmas. Author is going to make shuba *right* this year. Hopefully.

I'm aware the long nose on the snowman can be seen as an anti-Semitic trope, but that's not what it is here. I based it off an actual North Korean snowman (can't find the picture but it's genuinely a work of art, if I do I'll add it). Koreans tend to have flat noses, so Americans have egregiously long ones in comparison. I'm pretty sure that's what it represents. Just so you're all aware. Also if you look close, South Pyongan's clasps on her leather coat are rifle rounds. ^^

And now. What you all (or at least one person) have been waiting for. I'm sorry in advance, but I did promise.

BOOM. Promise fulfilled.

While looking for a reference I foolishly looked up 'person tied up like Christmas present' with an innocent mind. Don't do that. Or at least don't do it without filters on. I did this without a reference in the end.

A long time ago I had a dream I was walking around a department store, and 'Morpheus' was chasing me. He is the Greek god of dreams, which I would swear I didn't know when I was awake. He was an old, sallow man with vacant eyes who never walked faster than a slow shuffle, but still just faster than me. I couldn't run, and there was no door to leave. I knew that if he caught me I would never wake up. He found me in an aisle, and as much as I strained I couldn't escape him. He reached me at the end of it, and was reaching out to touch me with one long, thin finger with a blackened nail when I awoke.

Merry Christmas again comrades!! Pray Morpheus does not visit.

Belarus And India

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

India is considered a Buddha by Buddhists, and when it comes to caste his is the highest.
The tilak (the mark on his forehead) is a Hindu symbol supposed to denote your sect (or if you're attending a ceremony devoted to one god in specific you can change it to theirs from what I saw online). I was thinking India is sort of just 'Hindu' because representing one sect over another would promote division, and he has quite enough of that, so I made one up for him. Instead of representing a single sect, it's to represent his devotion to India in general. I'm thinking this could be an old tradition that was repressed during British colonial rule, so the older symbols would have been different.
This India was formed when Britain took over fully in 1858 because the old one's resentment had grown from the famines, and her revolt against the East Empire- I mean East India Trading Company (Elder Scrolls reference, sorry) worried him. I think he's very into fashion, and is a clothing designer. But he's also very adventurous. He's the sort of person to see a small hole and go 'Oo, cave. Time to explore.' Then he squirms into this dark hole in his gold thread-embroidered silk clothes. Or 'short hike up that mountain,' and it's a six-hour walk. He and China passive-aggressively try to out peacock each other when they meet. China with any other country in a diplomatic setting wears his black suit, but with India he wears increasingly elaborate cultural clothes. But India just always wears lots of colours.
I think I'm giving him a sort of flamboyant impression, but he's not. It's literally just his clothes. Otherwise he's a very steady person. The sort to see you walking in the rain with no umbrella, so he wordlessly hands you his with a smile then disappears into the rainstorm. I also think he's a headwear guy. Many different turbans and hats.
Also because some people are unenlightened and will never see nirvana, if you can see the swastika on his half cape, it's the Buddhist/Hindu one. Hitler must have thought Germany didn't have a good culture of its own because he stole a lot of other people's

symbols. Sad! I *am* enlightened and know Germany has a great culture, and they already had the perfect symbol- bratwurst. Tasty bratwurst. Slap that on your flag.

After CCCP's funeral, Russia burned down their family dacha in a fit of rage and grief. But Belarus remembered that their dad's coat was still in there, so she ran in to get it. Russia ran in after, but wasn't fast enough. She had to go all the way upstairs, so by the time she got the coat, the house was fully in flames. She was wearing her scarf as a headscarf for the funeral, so when it caught it burned her face, and spread to her clothes. Russia managed to pull her out, but the scars were permanent. Not a good day for anyone.
Russia is the one that fixed her scarf after. Belarus actually isn't ashamed of her scars at all. Like most of CCCP's children (and most Countryhumans in general) she's a weird little woman, and she actually thinks they're really cool and make her look intimidating. She only covers them because she knows they make Russia feel guilty, and since Ukraina has been loudly telling people that Russia's the one that burned her, it reinforces that enemy propaganda angle of 'Oh poor Belarus needs freedom from Russia.' In reality, Belarus is one of the few ex-Soviet Republics that got actively involved in her governance from the beginning, fighting to get control until she succeeded in 1995. For years she had more of it over her country than Russia had over his.
Don't let her smile fool you. She has the same unpleasant resting face as CCCP, Russia, and Ukraina. She has a mood disorder like those last two, but where Russia is 'I have depression and I'm not going to do anything about it,' and Ukraina is 'There's nothing wrong with me so I don't have to do anything about it,' Belarus is 'There's something wrong with me and I'm going to do something about it.' Unfortunately that something isn't therapy or medication, it's 'I'm going to power through this with sheer force of will and conquer it with a smile!' Part of her cheeriness is also to balance with Russia and Ukraina. She's more serious when she's not around them.
I also tried to make her a little chubby. Because her diet is 90% potatoes.

Also a bit of Soviet siblings lore- most countries don't use nicknames since it's seen as denying another country's statehood. (America

calls Canada 'Nada,' which he used to like because it made it feel like they had a special bond, but now feels like America uses it specifically to deny him as a sovereign nation. North and South are both only fine with the other calling them that; America is the only person South doesn't protest against when he uses it, but South isn't actually fine with it.) But CCCP encouraged them among his kids to reinforce that they were family. Modern day some are very adverse to the nickname, some miss it, some only accept it from certain other siblings, and some actively encourage the use with their old siblings. Russia always tries to use Ukraina's nickname (Yura) because he still wants to be family, but Ukraina feels like he's doing it intentionally to not recognize her. She refuses to call him by his nickname (Roshka), which makes him feel like she doesn't want to be family anymore. Bela is fine being called Bela by all parties.

Fake Smile

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

The early stages (and current stages) of their relationship where North treats China like he's the devil and planning to stab him in the back (literally) at any time are dear to me.

'What's he planning? What's his angle?'
'Lalala, we're going to be best friends~'

Well. It's not like North was *wrong*.

This font might look familiar to a certain group of people. That is because I downloaded Lana del Rey album cover fonts to make *these* images:

He inspires me.

Also this painting by North Korean artist An Myeong-seok because I love it.

China-vision of North and Hae....

IMPORTANT. I have a chapter written for Chasing Liberty. It's one of the long ones, but it's able to be broken up into two if I wanted. Would you like one long chapter or two short ones, risking having a third book? Please answer.

I feel like I shouldn't need to say this, but if you don't stand with Iran, you stand with Israel. It's no coincidence that these protests are happening when they are the last government in the Middle East that supports Palestine and resists America and Israel (government, so not counting Houthis and Hezbollah). Saying 'but Iran does have genuine problems' is just manufacturing consent for regime change. They do, because *every* country does. And yet far more people came out in support of their government despite those complaints because they know they will *never* be solved by foreign missile strikes and turning the country over to Israel. Iraq, Syria,

Libya, we all have dozens of examples that prove that only makes things worse every single time. The hand of Mossad and foreign interference is heavy in how cutting the internet took the rioters' direction, and in their wanton violence. When they say the death toll is rising in headlines, they want you to picture evil Iranian police gunning down peaceful protestors. But many of these people are armed, burning clinics, and killing police and civilians. Violence is necessary for change, yes, but *organized* violence. You burn government buildings, not homes if you can help it, you target *only* police, not doctors and hospital patients, and you shut down factories and stores, not emergency services. Chaotic violence accomplishes nothing. That is the mark of a movement with either no real organization, or leaders with ulterior motives.

When Iranian diaspora are actively demanding 'regime change,' it sweeps away any pretence. When they advocate for the monarchy back, it's clear it isn't about democracy. And when the former Crown Prince is begging on his knees for the US to bomb the country that he fled while he sits comfortably in Washington, it's clear it isn't about the well-being of Iranians.

It, like everything else, is nuanced. But we unfortunately haven't been able to live in a world with nuance for a long time. It is Anti-Imperialism and a multipolar world or it is Imperialism and American hegemony. It is Iran or it is the total domination of the Middle East by America and Israel.

Turkmenistan

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

time skip

This is canon but also not canon. Not canon because North doesn't talk to China at UN meetings unless necessary (don't want to look too friendly), China doesn't wear his changshan to meetings, and Turkmenistan doesn't attend meetings at all. But it is canon in that it does happen after Warring Pyongyang. I just wanted to draw Turkmenistan's current design.

Turkmenistan as a country is proof that the US doesn't go after the DPRK because they genuinely think they do human rights abuses or because they care about people in poorer countries. Turkmenistan isn't explicitly pro-US, but they do maintain neutrality in a way that benefits them, and isn't actively involved in protecting their people or resources, so they're not a challenge to the 'natural order' of things. I'm not going to get into it because Turkmenistan is growing closer to China and is part of the Belt and Road Initiative, so I'm not going to be part of manufacturing consent when the US *does* suddenly decide it cares, but their list of leaders has been what propagandists claim the Kim family is- unhinged and egocentric- but with actual proof and none of the benefits (UN has admitted the DPRK has an admirable healthcare system, as well as a LOT of doctors, and one of their main challenges is sanctions, while Turkmenistan has limited doctors and their system is underfunded, yet you never hear about that). A large part of 'mysterious weird Turkmenistan' is still just cultural ignorance and racism, but there are enough things where it's like 'okay, if you're going after the DPRK because of *claims* of that, you should be going after Turkmenistan because of *proof* of that.'

Anyway, Turkmenistan herself isn't necessarily mistreated, she's just sort of put up on a pedestal and also not allowed to leave Ashgabat (the capital). It's a 'Nooo, you're our Countryhuman, you shouldn't have to lift a finger to do anything ever. Let *us* run the country and

you just sit back and relax.' She's not allowed to use the internet often, but I like to think she's heard of herself being referred to as 'the North Korea of Central Asia' (by idiots that don't know anything about the DPRK and also probably know very little about Turkmenistan), and as a very lonely person latches onto the idea that the nice man she used to know is just like her. So when she finally gets to meet him again, she's a little... intense. Korea would like Russia to never bring his sister over again.

Korea and Hae hiding behind a counter as Turkmenistan and Russia look for them:
Hae- Well well. Look how the turns table.
Korea- It's fucking 'tables turn.' *throws her to Russia*

For a lore fun fact, I think the UN would have this resolution that every Countryhuman needs to visit a UN meeting of any sort at least once a year, and if they don't, they need to arrange a private trip to New York to speak with him alone. It's supposed to be a measure against Countryhumans being abused by their leaders, but in reality, if you're a US ally, the rule doesn't apply so stringently. Syria hasn't been seen at the UN since the coup, but she hasn't been summoned yet, and Turkmenistan's government ignores the summons for her frequently, while if North were to miss a meeting, they would be *on* him. And the UN doesn't say anything about Palestine missing meetings, but in his case it's not because they're fine with the possibility of his leaders abusing him (they actually insist that Hamas has taken him 'hostage' (purposeful word), but because they *know* Israel is. They want to deny Palestine his voice. He wants to attend, but can't because of the risks.

This rule really irritates North, even though he already goes to every major meeting he can. It's just the idea that they think they have the right to summon him if he was too busy to, especially when they know damn well he supports his government, and are always going on about *him* being the dictator. They can't paint him as a victim precisely because he attends so many mettings and is so vocal, so they paint him as the abuser, but are still 'oh-so-concerned' about making *sure* he's not a victim (ignoring where he *is* a victim of America and the sanctions regime).

America frequently tries to push through resolutions to make it so

that every Province/Statehuman etcetera has to attend a special meeting in New York without their Countryhuman, but it frequently gets vetoed in the Security Council and voted against in the General Assembly. His enemies realize it's a clear maneuver to try and gain access to their territories to stoke separatism and propagandize them, and even his allies don't want to go through the hassle of sending their subdivisions across the world once a year. If this ever got passed, North would *not* send his provinces. Not happening.

Judgement

[image] [image]

[image] [image] [image]
[image]

North about women: Won't even call one a bitch. Very ardent about language used to refer to them
North about China: Harlot. Whore. Slut. Degenerate.

A version where he is judging you, the reader, for your choices.

Undershirts were common as underwear back then. I feel like North was very pleased when he got access to the concept of undergarments. Another layer is always good. He's a little more lax in modern day, and prefers not loose, not tight boxer shorts. Don't ask what China prefers.

Also as promised, a couple of characters in their animal forms (or China vision). North is the white tiger, Hae is the orange, China is the lóng, South is the fox, CCCP and Russia are the bears, SH is the goshawk, and I think we all know who the bald eagle is.

Don't look too closely at Russia. That is what a bear cub looks like.

And also because I promised CCCP in space awhile ago, here it is:

This is exactly what you wanted.

Recently I made a cake with ube-flavoured condensed milk layers and buttercream. I'm not sure something that stains your insides purple is actually edible. But it was a very good cake. So sickeningly rich and sweet that everyone I gave it to agreed only one slice could be eaten a day, very slowly. But very good. Maybe I'll make a list of some of the common recipes I use, along with the characters' favourite foods. ^^

Lipstick On A Pig

[image] [image] [image]
[image] [image]

The only reason Hae's make-up looks so neat is because SH did it. She isn't allowed out of the house when she paints it herself. Think Asobi Asobase make-up scene.

Sorry to South Pyongan for the title. I just feel like that saying would resonate with her. She wouldn't admit it, but it would.

I feel like she has a complicated relationship with being a woman, but is entirely unaware of it (second most emotionally unintelligent character award). For the first few months of their lives, her and North Pyongan were almost entirely separate from civilization and the expectations that 1910s Korea would have for men and women (or boys and girls, since they were 15), and while they had their common sense about gender roles and things, South Pyongan is not a common sense enjoyer (they can 'search' their common sense for more niche information, but she just sticks with the surface level stuff- you're South Pyongan, you're a Provincehuman, this is Korea, this is how you walk and talk, etcetera). So it wasn't until they started to visit towns and cities and join fights that gender roles started to get projected on them (men talking to her brother instead, saying girls can't fight). But at that point she'd already firmly settled into the 'male' role of protector, while North Pyongan had settled into the 'female' role of protected. So she was like 'Okay, well clearly that's not true.' And she also really doesn't like to be told what to do.

She actually has no conscious bias of what's feminine or masculine when it comes to women (she doesn't see a woman wearing makeup or pretty dresses as too 'girly' or one with short hair who refuses to wear skirts as masculine) because she's a very 'masculine' woman, but she is objectively a woman. So anything she'd do is feminine. But I think subconsciously she rejects more traditionally feminine things for herself- she likes fashionable clothes, but she doesn't like

shopping and trying them on, she refused to let SH teach her embroidery, sewing is her least favourite chore, she doesn't like wearing dresses or skirts, and makes a fuss about putting on choson-ot, she gets embarrassed about liking spas- because she knows they're 'feminine' now and everyone else is constantly reinforcing that 'this is what women should do.' (North Hamgyong especially makes fun of her for the spa thing- but how does HE know she was at the spa??) And she doesn't like to be told what to do.

South Pyongan doesn't actually want to be more 'feminine' (if she wants to do something, she does it), but I think there's this sort of shame that she's 'losing' at it in her. I think the reason she really doesn't like pretty men (China) or bara-type men (CCCP) is from subconscious competitiveness. She always gives some nothing answer when people ask her why she has it out for them ('Men shouldn't be that pretty, (except for my brother he's the exception), men shouldn't be that big') but she genuinely doesn't actually know why they get to her. But I think it's because with muscular men, she's always been in a very 'male' protector role (and praised for it by North), so when she sees someone that's more 'masculine' than her, she feels like she's losing. But with bara-types, she can just beat the shit out of them and now she's better at being masculine. But she can't do that with pretty boys. She's objectively not actually that pretty. I like to think she actually looks more masculine than North Pyongan. She's attractive, but a big part of that is her confidence and swagger. She's not the sort of woman you'd call beautiful. So when she sees a beautiful man, it fills her with that sense of 'losing' at being a woman. The only reason North Pyongan can get away with being pretty is because 1) she can say it's because he's her brother so obviously he has her looks, and 2) she knows him well enough that he's not a man to her, and she also knows she's better at being a man than him anyway, so she still wins. She doesn't necessarily *want* to be beautiful (she already considers herself the sexiest person in Korea, which means she's the sexiest person in the world because foreigners are ugly, obviously), and she doesn't want to be more feminine or more masculine. But she *does* want to win.

Her and North Pyongan were very progressive when it came to views on gender from the start because of how they both violate what's expected from theirs. He's softer, sensitive, an artist, and the

one who would cook their meals for them, and took to sewing and other tasks easier. Meanwhile she's loud, aggressive, physically strong, and, I repeat, more emotionally unintelligent than anyone else but North (who is the uncrossable bar, yes SP would be pissed at losing this, too). So neither of them ever really make judgements on what traits are masculine or feminine. (South Pyongan *will* tease a man for being soft or liking more feminine things, but it's not because she actually has something against that, it's because she will sniff out any weakpoint and go for it like a Hwasong-19; North Hamgyong is a victim of this) But I think if her and North Pyongan had been genderbent, they'd actually both be a bit sexist. They'd have this view of 'I am the ideal man/woman, so this is how all men/women should be.'

Mmm. Anyway this is all to say, I think South Pyongan really likes the concept of dressing up in the riskiest dress she can get away with, and putting on make-up so she can look even hotter (her secondary goal; first is to be the fittest person in the room at all times), but she doesn't do it often. She thinks make-up makes other women look great, but she thinks it makes her look worse somehow. It just never feels right to her.

South Pyongan tip-toeing into a spa in robe, jumps as she spots someone Whoa, uh, hey.
North Hamgyong: *snorts* Really? *You're* having a spa day?
SP: What? No, no, I'm just here on a thing for Korea, y- Hey wait. Why are *you* at the spa?
long staredown
NH: No one can ever fucking know about this.
SP: Yeah, no one.
Ryanggang in a robe on a reclining chair in the corner with a face mask on

I was looking up pictures of Chinese prostitutes from the early 1900s for something I'm drawing. And I found a picture of a little girl on a man's shoulders. And the caption was something like 'Younger girls around eight or nine would be carried to their destination on someone's shoulders.' Crying all of a sudden. It's horrific on its own, but also they're little girls. Their dad should be carrying them on his shoulders at the market. But some guy is

carrying her off to be raped. This was last night but I'm crying again typing this. Sometimes I think maybe I hate men too much but maybe I don't hate them enough. I just needed to share that because it is genuinely distressing me and still is.

Also stupid disclaimer that a man would never put when saying he hates women: I'm not a misandrist. That's almost as antithetical to Communism as misogyny. I like some men. Like Kim Jong-un and Xi Xinping. And Lenin. And... Father. And some of you comrades identify as men, and you're cool. I am just of the firm belief that the majority of men need severe re-education and haven't been proven wrong yet.

Local Queer Evades Responsibility

[image] [image] [image][image]

He can't keep getting away with this.

In his defense, he already has to doctor nine people, half of whom do *not* want to be doctored and the other half want to get an x-ray for a cough. But in offense, that's not why he lies about not being able to cook. He just doesn't want to for that many people. 'What do you eat when you're in your province, Kang?' 'I usually just go to restaurants, or get instant meals.' *goes home and crafts beautiful healthy soup from scratch; never once eats out or instant*

Another one from 4shiro's pinterest. ^^
Thank you for curating things I can redraw for me.

Since UIP is here, I'll add some Muslim Countryhuman lore. Female Muslim Countryhumans have different views on wearing hijab. Some wear it faithfully (Malaysia and Somalia as examples), some have decided that since they don't have hair, they don't have to (Syria), and some won't wear it normally, but will for going to mosque or professional meetings. The hijab isn't actually about covering hair exactly (and hijab is more than a head covering), it's about preserving modesty and showing devotion to Allah. But Countryhuman/Provincehuman women don't exactly *have* to do that because they aren't 'temptations' as they're above human desires, and they're also sent by Allah. Of course most of them do to show they're devout and honour their god.
I think a lot of Muslim scholars would disagree on whether they should or not because it would be something that's differed throughout history. Maybe originally they didn't have to, but then men who felt like their female Countryhuman had too much power for a woman would try to take it away (not in that view of 'wearing a hijab is oppression,' but in the view of making a messenger of Allah less 'divine'). Or originally they had to, then a female

Countryhuman wanted to set herself apart from human women and took it off to give that 'I am above humans' impression. I think it would be the first one as Islam was very socially progressive at its inception, and that would also be the peak of 'Countryhumans are divine messengers' for Islam. Then evil men taking advantage of religion come later, per usual. Either way, both of those things definitely would have happened in the long course of Islamic history, and since events like that would happen often, the current opinions of scholars would differ, and so would the Countryhumans'. Modern day, wearing hijab or not wearing hijab can be done as any sort of political statement, or just out of personal choice, like with human Muslim women.

Also I think in this universe, your Countryhuman would be considered a mahram, which is part of a Muslim's close family. They're the people that can see a woman without her head-covering, she can be alone with, and engage in physical contact with (I'm not Muslim, so if I get something wrong, please tell). For this reason, Muslim Countryhumans also can't marry or do other things with their people (though some do not adhere to that specific view) Modern day there would be different opinions on who counts as 'your Countryhuman.' Some people would argue whether or not it only counts if your Countryhuman is Muslim, or if it's whatever country you're born in; some would consider it only their Countryhuman and the exact province they were born/live in; others would consider it *all* of their Provincehumans; some would argue over whether it only applied to your birth country and not to a country you moved to, and etcetera. It's really a matter of personal choice and comfort. Some people wouldn't even consider the country they were born and raised in as mahram. But I think the Qur'an would categorize it as *your* Countryhuman, so the one you were born in, and only if they're Muslim. So a woman from Palestine could have Palestine see her without her hijab (if she was comfortable with that) or escort her places, but Iran and Iraq couldn't.

About the Epstein files. I will not say what I want to say. Because it will send me into a fury that does no good. But I will say that there is a certain limit of money people can go over where they become

fundamentally inhuman. Wicked acts may be human, anyone can be evil, but their way of seeing the world isn't. It's one you can only form after years of seeing the people around them as tools. Everyone is just numbers, how much they can make, how much they can buy. They already had to be fundamentally disconnected from humanity to exploit the amount of people they do to get to that amount of money. And being so far away, so removed from the core concept of a person makes them not one. Do not feel love for these people because they can't feel it for you. Do not feel guilt for them because they can no longer feel guilt even for the people they tear apart. The only difference between you and a little girl being sex trafficked and raped multiple times a day, a woman forced to be an incubator, or a woman or even a man trying to get the truth out and being murdered and left in a forgotten grave is that they didn't get their hands on you. It doesn't surprise me to hear they were probably eating babies. It isn't because they're 'demonic,' it isn't for esoteric magical powers. It's because I would eat giraffe or mammoth meat. And we are even farther removed from that in their eyes. I would never torture an animal, but I *would* tear paper into strips when I'm bored. We aren't humans to the rich. We aren't even animals. We are objects, we are commodities, and if they want to buy us they can. They can afford it. Do not forgive the rich. Do not wish mercy or reform for them, because they can't be. You don't wish that the rabid dog can be reformed. You know there's no cure. There isn't even any sympathy in that the dog didn't choose its sickness- every single capitalist chose to be bourgeois, they chose to use people and steal their labour to line their own pockets, they chose to inherit their parents' industries and practices, they chose to buy and sell people and use them like dolls. They *chose* this. Adventurism doesn't solve the root problem, but when the alternative is letting these things walk around in our skin and tear ours off... If you see a rabid dog, it isn't just self-preservation to get rid of it, it is morally correct. And Americans see a lot of dogs they *know* are sick every single day.

Obligation Chocolate

[image] [image] [image]

There's a non-zero chance China would actually pick Countryball North up in chopsticks and treat him like mochi.

(not canon. but the first one is)
China calling it obligation chocolate and North getting incredibly irritated for no reason. Even though if China called it friend chocolate, he would look him in the eyes and say they aren't friends.
(China will not be getting anything for White Day)

Overcoming 'should I give my female coworkers gifts today?' by deciding we are all close enough to give them friend choco (I see most of them maybe once a month, but whoever comes in tomorrow will have chocolate). I made brigadeiro, so I hope they like them. ^^ Yes I hate the overconsumption of this holiday. but I also love baking and giving people things. And boss is a family friend so I don't have to rebel against social norms today by refusing to give him anything.

I've put these in the message board before, but for today's theme I shall say how the cast would react to being asked to be someone's Valentine (assuming they were a partner).

North- would turn Y/N down. It's a Japanese holiday and he will not be celebrating that. He is so insistent that he'd actively give away whatever she gave him (not choco, since he doesn't like it), and would refuse to go on a date. If he didn't realize what day it was at first, he'd cancel any plans they made. He's very serious about this.

South- He definitely gets tons of choco and proposals from all his fans. But if a woman he liked asked him personally, he'd be overjoyed. He'd plan a fancy, expensive date, then happily eat all the choco she gave him (a lot of his gets thrown out since he has to watch his weight, but would feel too bad if he gave it away, then

the people that gifted it found out).

Korea- Still wouldn't want to celebrate, so any date would have to be at the high-rise. He's trying to delegitimize holidays like this. But he'd be really thrilled inside that Y/N asked him, and grudgingly accept whatever she gave him (dark chocolate or ginseng candy). He'd make her dinner at home, and get her something on White Day.

SH- She'd blush and act humble and embarrassed before she accepts. She doesn't like sweet choco, so she'd have to be offered the bitter kind, maybe coffee-flavoured, or fruits that were dipped in it. She rushes off to plan a day-long date. It would be subtle, so no one knew they were celebrating, but she wouldn't make it feel subtle. A man asking would make her smug, since she doesn't think women should be obliged to get chocolate for them.

Hae- She'd be *really* happy, then sober up as she remembers it's an evil holiday. 'Ah'm sorry, ah can't be your valentine. But ah can take the choco, and we can go on a romantic dinner 'cuz those are normal things to do, and *not* 'cuz it's a holiday.' She'd share her choco. She doesn't actually know anything about the holiday, so she doesn't question a man giving her choco.

South Pyongan- She gets suspicious that she's being asked to make choco. She is appeased by being offered it (though internally she's irked for reasons she doesn't think about). She'll go on an arcade/ clam barbeque date if it gets her more chocolate.

North Pyongan- He blushes and demurely accepts (the choco will be stolen by his sister). 'But perhaps we don't say we're on a date.' A romantic ride and a picnic on the riverbank. Him and Liaoning talk about how much they hate Japan.

Chagang- Immediately accepts choco with a 'Yes.' He'll get flowers, take her to a cinema, dinner, then a romantic film marathon at home.

Ryanggang- 'I don't see why not.' He won't eat the choco, but he'll accept them, and take her to a nice flower-viewing and dinner.

Kangwon- 'Yeah, sure.' He can't be in public with UIP, so they go on a hike, and have a private picnic. He actually cooks (not that he'll tell UIP that). He would only eat a few choco, then give the rest to his cousins. UIP would make him extra just for that.

North Hamgyong- He wouldn't accept choco or a date. He is *not* celebrating a Japanese/Western holiday. He would also actively cancel plans to avoid it.

Hwang- He would explain the entirely of the history of Valentine's Day, and how it became what it is in East Asia. 'So you see why we provinces can't exactly celebrate a holiday that is not only driven by needless consumerism, but also takes incredible influence from Japan. O-Oh, but I appreciate the sentiment, and would love to go on a completely unaffiliated date. Though we must be subtle.' Grand People's Study House date. He's reluctant to eat the last choco because he really appreciates them.

China- Hates Japanese holidays, loves choco and dates. He will only accept a date if the choco is to his standards. Expensive or tasty ones aren't the key (but he will eat them anyway). He won't explain his standards, but they have to be homemade, and have passion put into them. And they can't be sloppy from lack of effort. He'll be able to tell. But they can be sloppy from lack of skill, or not taste good, so long as he can tell she tried. He doesn't care about flavour, but he does like experimental ones. If he does accept a date, he fully expects to be the focus. She has to plan the date, buy or make dinner, and get him gifts. But if she succeeds, he'll massively reciprocate on White Day.

Nipponia- Slightly miffed to be the one receiving. 'Eh? Just because I used to be a boy, doesn't mean I should be the one getting choco on Valentine's Day. I'lltakethemthough. But *I'm* the one asking *you.* Hmph.' (she's sensitive to any hint of being viewed as similar to her old selves). Cute winter city trip with warm drinks and snacks.

Western celebrators now.

Russia- No ceremony. The type to thrust flowers and choco at her and say 'You are my valentine.' But then Nipponia flips it around, and he gets to be dragged around by her. He's actually very touched

at being asked. Kicking his heels in bed while he eats the choco she gave him after he gets home. 'She asked me to be her valentine.' This is a sort of shared day for them, since White Day is for him and March 8th is for her.

Ukraina- 'I guess I haven't had any better offers.' (she's very touched) She expects to be asked a week in advance, with flowers, choco, and many compliments on the day.

Canada- He has to prepare two weeks in advance. Partly to book a restaurant and make sure everything is perfect, but also because he needs a week to talk himself into asking his own girlfriend to be his valentine. If Ukraina asked him, his entire flag would turn red and his heart would give out. Cute skating trip.

UIP- After a lot of inner struggle, he gives Kangwon homemade choco. Kangwon decides not to tell him he's placed himself in the woman's role. If Kangwon asked him, he'd have a moment of internalized homophobic, but would push it aside to say he'd love to. It would mean a lot to him, since they have to be quiet about their relationship, and he'd know Kangwon was going out of his way to mark the day (this would happen on White Day).

CCCP- 'Да. Of course.' He gets her flowers and takes her to a dacha for a homemade meal.

Another from the 4shiro Pinterest board (hi!) I deleted the original by accident, but it was male Rover from Wuthering Waves.

Don't feel too bad for him. He's getting many choco today. An insane amount of choco.

I wrote this dream down awhile ago and I have been waiting to share it. Very eclectic.
Parts I remember- I lived in a big house on a hill with a lot of people. To name some- North, China, Chagang, Krim and Kuril, (I don't know if there were others, this was just who I identified directly, but I think it was implied that the rest of the cast were there, Columbina, Ineffa, and Aino from Genshin, a random woman

who lived in the basement with her five year-old daughter, a middle-aged otaku who was everything you'd imagine an otaku to be, a heavyset black American man (?; I don't know if he lived with us or was just visiting). Also I was there. Just me. I was also POV-hopping a lot. At one point I was me working out in front of the house, then the American man walked up and went in. I went around to the back, and someone pointed out a face was watching me from our window. I was like, 'Aw, my cat.' Except it... sort of didn't look like my cat. Or a cat. Then the person (might have been Ukraina) said she wondered if it was the same face the one woman's daughter saw awhile ago. She said she saw my face watching her from outside the basement window (the basement was a huge underground cave system that just the mother and her daughter lived in while we all lived in the small aboveground house, for some reason), but when her mother went to check, there was just a hatchet leaning against the glass. I was like, 'I... have no memory of doing that. So it probably wasn't me.' But I have no faith in myself so internally I was stressing that it was me. Then China started setting off huge, aggressive fireworks right in the back, raining sparks down on the house. Krim and Kuril (and me) loved it, but North was screaming at him to stop before he burned the house down (he did not stop). I was him for a few seconds, then after they stopped, I was Ineffa. And she got left alone with the otaku, and he convinced her to let him make modifications to her body (she's a robot) for Aino's sake (the girl she takes care of that made her). Then Ineffa was powered down and I was an observer (thank you god of dreams for not making me the otaku at that point). And he was being really weird about it, but not really weird about her. He wasn't doing strange things to her body, he was very clearly just excited about the concept of modifying a robot. Then he made her look like a white American woman from the early 2000s. I don't actually know what this means conceptually, she literally just looked like an average brunette white woman in plain clothes, like those American celebrities you see that aren't impressive in any way. And then I was her again and she was pleased. For some reason. I don't know how being a middle-aged white American woman would help her take care of Aino better, but she seemed to think it would. But the guy was suddenly really guilty about it because he'd made her look like his fantasy (an average-looking foreign woman you could see almost anywhere), and he didn't want

Aino to get mad at him or think he was a creep. So he kept trying to get Ineffa to stay away from her. I was sort of swapping between them at this point every few seconds just to read their minds. At one point when I was Ineffa he gaslit me into thinking my nails were painted for some reason. They weren't. Then I was me, working out at the front while Columbina watched. Then Dottore (also Genshin) appeared the way he looks in his boss fight, and was trying to kill us. But I was in the middle of a set, so I just kept doing squats, sidling away with every step and deflecting orbs of light he sent at me while Columbina was doing acrobatics to dodge his blasts and trying to kill him. I was yelling, 'Just twenty more and I'll help!' And there was this sense that I was actually full of great power so the second I stopped squatting and actually did something, he'd be dead. Clearly dream-me had the sense of 'I only got this great power though training. If I stop, I won't stay powerful.' The moment I stopped working out, the dream ended. The fireworks were the most vivid part of the dream, they were so loud and bright. They were so amazing (and almost lit me on fire at one point).
I also had another dream where I was Hotaru and took Columbina to a manzai show, and she got arrested for being a goddess, and I sort of just... let it happen. I was plagued with guilt after. But I still watched the show before going to get her.

SH The Good

[image] [image] [image]

[image]

SH in one of Glinda's outfits from Wicked For Good (but blue). This was the one I thought best suited her. ^^
This is also why I said my next North Hamgyong drawing would have him naked. But now considering it, he is not naked. He has a hat.

Also I did redraws of Soo Chun-hui and Seo Chung-cha for Safeway Pyongyang, so here's them in their uniforms and the house visit outfits.
I have some Grace-related (from Chasing Liberty for anyone who doesn't read it; please go read it) art and lore for her and Angela (the first girlfriend America murdered), but I can't post it until a certain chapter. Chewing on my leg.

And also my Mass Effect character ten seconds before she kills herself and merges all synthetic and organic life in the galaxy.

Also I think it's Ramadan time, so Ramadan Mubarak for those who celebrate. ^^

And also. My JoJo/Shrek crossover all of a sudden. This assumes you have have base knowledge of JoJo's and Shrek. Spoilers for part 6 of JoJo's, and also Shrek? Not sure if people care about Shrek spoilers.

So at the end of Stone Ocean where Pucchi tries to reset the universe the first time, something goes wrong and Jotaro, Jolyne, and a very injured Anasui get isekai'ed to the Shrek universe. This is post-Shrek 4, and Shrek's children are all 19, so the same age as Jolyne. They meet Shrek and his family in the swamp, and try to find out what happened. When they explain everything that went on, and that Anasui is in need of urgent medical care, Fiona offers

to let them stay, since her daughter, Felicia, is in ogre med-school. Shrek is wary of them and doesn't want to help, but then Prince Charming (who is supposed to be dead) appears, trying to seek revenge. Jotaro uses Star Platinum to freeze time and beat him to a pulp, promptly killing him. Because of this, Shrek grudgingly allows them to stay. Fiona feels like getting visitors from another universe and Prince Charming coming back to life at the same time is too coincidental, and shares her fears with Shrek. He has experience with other universes from Shrek 4, and goes to Rumpelstiltskin, who is kept in a cage behind his house.
But! Rumpelstiltskin is gone. They realize that Pucchi was also iseakai'd with them, and that he and Rumpelstiltskin are working together. Rumpelstiltskin is given a Stand by Pucchi, which is called 「Funkytown」. By making a contract with a non-Stand user, he can bring their wishes about, and since this is another universe, he can even bring people back to life, the one thing a Stand can't do. Because it's not really the Stand doing it, it's the contract.
「Funkytown」 just let's him *make* the contract. Pucchi wants to use this power to bring DIO back to life. But to do this, they need to find a non-Stand user to make the contract. They also need to be driven by intense emotions or the power of the contract will burn them up. They meet Rapunzel, and she says she'll do it if they bring her fiancé, Prince Charming back. But it turns out that a signee can only make one contract. So they try Charming, but he refuses. They have to bring his mother, the Fairy Godmother, back, and she'll do it. Meanwhile Rumpelstiltskin, infuriated by Charming, kills him before the Fairy Godmother can see him. Pucchi covers this up so she'll work with them. But she knows magic, so when she comes back, she realizes that in order to bring DIO back, Pucchi would have to do one more thing- use Made in Heaven to combine the two universes into a single singularity, which would destroy everything in the Shrek universe. She doesn't want to lose her son again (she is unaware that he tried to seek vengeance on Shrek and Fiona and that Jotaro already killed him, or of Rumpelstiltskin's secondary elimination, and the family thinks they *did* kill him for good). She goes to the Shreks and the Kujos and tells them of Pucchi's plans, and that Rumpelstiltskin is seeking to bring back Farquaad to make the contract to merge the universes and bring back DIO. Since Farquaad is a bitter, unhinged little man, he'll do it just to kill Shrek and Fiona.

But Dragon ate him, so they have to find where she left him, high in the mountains. So it's a race against time as Jotaro, Jolyne, Anasui, Donkey, the cat with the boots, Fiona, Felicia, and the Fairy Godmother try to beat Pucchi and Rumpelstiltskin to Far Far Away. Those two also have the magic mirror because he's going to be the one to wish for Farquaad back. He hated him, but he was also, unfortunately, in love with him. Along the way, Jotaro learns from Shrek how to be more vulnerable, and grows closer with Jolyne. Shrek also reconnects with his daughter since she's been so busy with ogre med-school, something he was hesitant about since ogres don't usually go to school. But from her he learns to be more in touch with the times. I think Jotaro and Shrek would definitely go eat ramen and sake together after work. Jolyne also grows closer with Felicia, and they strike up a romance. Since Jolyne is so rough-and-tumble and Felicia would be a more energetic person, I think this would be cute. Then she also has a tough side that she learned from Fiona. Jolyne and Fiona would get along great, too, she'd become like a second mom to her. Anasui, Donkey, and the cat would become best friends because I just feel like they would. Guy pals. We would also see a softer side of the Fairy Godmother where she talks about her hardships growing up as a woman with magic, and being a single mom. She becomes like a rich aunt to them. The cast feels guilty because they can't tell her 'they' killed Charming because they need her on their side. So when they reach the mountain, Pucchi and Rumpelstiltskin are already there, hauling the magic mirror, and they've brought Farquaad back. He then smashes the magic mirror because he is a homphobe. They're interrupted before they can get him to sign the contract to merge the universes, and a fierce battle breaks out. Pucchi can't use Made in Heaven properly because if he does, it will send them back to their universe and he'll lose his chance to bring DIO back, but he still packs a punch. Shrek gets mortally injured trying to save Felicia and Donkey, and Jotaro takes a blow meant for Jolyne. It's down to just Jolyne and Felicia making a last stand, when it cuts to the Fairy Godmother. She declares that she knew 'they' had killed Charming for some time now (Pucchi got in contact with her to tell her this), and that she had come with them to make sure they were destroyed along with the universe. She has had Rumpelstiltskin make her a contract, presumably one to merge the universes. They can't stop her and she signs it. But to all of their shock, instead the JoJo's cast

starts to get sent home. The Fairy Godmother had grown too fond of them, and started to realize what kind of person she had turned Charming into with her overbearing love. While she can't forgive them, she can't bring herself to punish them. And on top of that, once the contracts were explained to her, she realized someone had brought her back, and that it had to be Charming. So she used her business sense to trick Rumpelstiltskin into making her a different contract, one to separate the universes and reset those who were dying. Jolyne and Felicia work together to kill Rumpelstiltskin, aided by a final sacrificial blast by the Fairy Godmother. Pucchi tries to use Made in Heaven to accelerate time through the full cycle, as he had planned to do originally, seeing as he's lost his chance to bring DIO back. Just like in Stone Ocean, he's killed before he can complete it, essentially erasing himself from the world, while changing the lives of those he interacted with.
The story ends with us seeing that due to Made in Heaven and the contract, the Shrek cast is in the JoJo's universe, their memories of the events completely erased, but they have a chance meeting once more when the girlfriends, Airin (Jolyne) and Felicity (Felicia) pick up Anakisu (Anasui) the hitchhiker and his pet donkey and cat on their way to see their families.

I would say sorry if this makes no sense to you, but I think this might just not make sense at all.

ALSO EPSTEIN FILES STUFF THAT INDICATES 9/11 WAS A INSIDE JOB. VINDICATED. VIN.DI.CA.TED.

KEEP YOUR PANTS ON!!

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Inspired by that story about the CIA plotting to drop large condoms labelled small on Soviet soldiers so they would think America men were all well-endowed. I'm fairly certain it's just an urban legend, not something that was actually going to happen, (though the CIA did try to kill Fidel Castro with an explosive seashell hoping he'd pluck it out of the water while swimming, so let's not underestimate them) but this is still inspired by it.
Out of character for both of them, but I thought it was funny. And also I'm fulfilling the 'more America' demand that one singular person has.

'Israel has a right to defend itself' after they launch another 'preemptive strike' when there was a peace deal within reach, killing over a hundred Iranian schoolgirls because it isn't enough to 'just' kill Palestinian children. And America assassinates a world leader when. This isn't America distracting from the Epstein files like some people say. They don't *need* a distraction. Most Americans don't care, and the ones that do can't do anything about it, just like the rest of us. It's not a distraction, it is just how the empire works. It's how it worked in Korea and Vietnam and Iraq and it is how it will keep working until it is destroyed. I hope Iran stands strong even with Iman Khamenei's martyrdom and I hope they annhilate every single one of those child-raping pig-dog Yanks and Israelis. For every person, American or not, who always supports America bringing 'freedom' to foreign nations no matter how many times it is demonstrated that American intervention brings only misery and violence, may *you* be granted freedom by a slow death. Mass murderers killing Cuba, Palestine, Venezuela, and all of Africa, trying to kill the DPRK and Iran. If any nation chose to nuke the entire continental United States tomorrow it would be deserved. At a certain point we need to acknowledge that while a world war would be disastrous and probably the largest singular loss of life

ever, it would be only a drop in the ocean compared to the amount the US has spilled, is spilling, and will continue to spill if it isn't put down. We are *in* a third world war already, everyone is just pretending we aren't while two nations slaughter their way around the world. I would choose for me and everyone I know to die in a missile strike tomorrow if it meant an end to the US empire and that billions of future children could grow up on a safe world. There is no amount they can suffer to make up for what they've done.

Women's Day And Recipes

[image] [image]

Featuring the main female cast (Liaoning gets to be here). Chibiesque proportions because this would have taken a week otherwise. Nipponia looks really short, but she's just crouching. And she also is really short.

The US is starting Freedom Shield tomorrow (huge war games in South Korea, if you have forgotten). I wonder which part of them thinks practicing invasion techniques and flying their bombers at the border with the DPRK while they are currently fighting a war they started with Iran that began with a sudden surprise attack is a good idea. It's like they can't possibly be trying to start a war with Korea when they're already burning though interceptors and money with Iran. It doesn't make sense. Yet the American regime does enjoy doing things that only make sense to a bloodthirsty crumbling empire. Remember that as much as the South Korean president says he wants peace with the North, he won't do the one thing that would get it- kick American bases out of his borders. And when we look at how the American bases in the Middle East are mobilizing to attack Iran, it is clear why the North would want them gone. Even if relations between the DPRK and South Korea were perfectly normal, if the US went to war with China or Russia, or chose to invade the North without South Korea (though that likely wouldn't happen) those bases would be used to launch missiles and wage war on them. And even if the two Koreas had a fine relationship, it would still make South Korea a target, the way Iran is targeting US bases in the UAE and Bahrain. South Korea has a modern army and their own defenses, and a defense pact with the US. Even if they were genuinely concerned about the North invading, they don't need to depend on American bases within their own borders. They only thing they gain is making a confrontation with the DPRK more likely, the designation as a hostile state, and Korean women raped and murdered by foreigners. They try to paint the DPRK's leadership as unreasonable when they reject the normalization of relations even now that the South's President isn't the type to stage

a false flag in order to invade them, but they have played though this before with the Sunshine and Moonshine Policies, and they know that any normalization is only temporary so long as America continues to occupy Korea. Lee Jae-myung can say he wants peace as much as he wants, but when he can't even cancel war games that injured over forty South Koreans and destroyed a neighbourhood last year, and that the US refuses to apologize for, it's clear that he's just paying lip service. If anything happens at Freedom Shield this year, I need you all to be smart enough to know that no matter who says what, America started it.

Okay! Now that is is Women's Day, here are some recipes you can make for the women in your life. Don't make them for men they don't deserve it. Unless it's your dad and you have a good relationship with him.

Most of these are recipes I've learned from my family or online, then adjusted. So I'm not responsible for creating most of them, these are just things I tend to make. Also I am not good at measurements.

Chocolate mousse

Melt 170 grams of chocolate over hot water (you boil a pot of water and put a bowl over top, and when it heats up the chocolate melts)

Remove from heat and add 4 egg yolks and as much vanilla as you want without making it watery. Stir them together.

Beat the 4 egg whites and 50 grams of powder sugar in a different bowl until you can drag a spoon through it and leave lines behind (you can do this by arm if you want muscles, otherwise use a mixer). Don't get yolk in it because the fat might stop it from forming. If you can't get it to beat, try cooling the bowl or whisk.

Whip 250 cc/ml of whipping cream in another bowl until it forms horns.

Fold the egg white mixture in with the chocolate, then fold the whipping cream in (DON'T stir, it makes it watery).

Then it's done. ^^ Sweetness can be adjusted by using bitter or sweet choco. This isn't a recipe you can really mess up because even if it comes out liquid, you can just freeze it. And if you don't melt the choco smoothly, it adds really nice crunchy bits. Mother makes this and doesn't use ingredient amounts so this is what I have worked out from watching her.

Butter mochi

Stir 100 grams of mochiko and 30 grams of cornstarch together. Add 180 cc/ml of milk and 50 grams of sugar. Then you can add 10 grams of cocoa powder, mugwort powder, taro powder or anything else to flavour it.

Put it in the microwave for forty seconds, take out, stir, put back in for another forty seconds, and keep doing this until it's a dough you can handle. Or cook it on a nonstick pan. Then take it off the heat, fold in a bit of butter, and work it until its stretchy and smooth.

This is the skin I make when I don't want to work much. You can wrap anything in it, even the frozen mousse from before. Very good.

Lemon cupcakes

Mix 375 grams of flour and half teaspoon salt in a bowl.

In another bowl, beat 227 grams of room temperature butter with 200 grams of white sugar. They need to be yellow, not white, and well-mixed. You can do this by hand.

Add 4 eggs. If you keep them in the fridge, make sure they've been out for awhile. Then add vanilla and as much lemon zest as humanly possible. You need this batter YELLOW. You can do this by grating two entire lemons skins into the bowl. Maybe more of you have more.

Lightly beat the flour bowl into the butter/sugar bowl, adding 250 cc/ml of milk in small amounts as you go. And the juice of at least two lemons. I usually use three. Don't mix it too much, only until the ingredients are intermingled smoothly.

Pour the batter into cupcake tins. You don't have to use liners, but it's easier and cuter.

Pre-heat an oven to 190 celsius/375 Farenheit/460 kelvin and cook until a toothpick comes out clean from the center, usually just under twenty minutes. If you have one of those stupid tiny ovens that hate me, just set it as high as possible and cook a little longer.

You can put any icing on these, but I use lemon.

Lemon icing

Add 227 grams of softened butter (softened, not soft) and the zest and juice of at least two lemons in a bowl. Beat it until they're completely combined.

Add 600 grams of powder sugar. I'm aware this is a lot of sugar. But the buttercream demands it. I usually do it by 120 grams so I have the bare minimum it takes to make it. You really just need it to be formed enough to pipe on. Beat it until it's fluffy.

Chill in the fridge, then put it on your cupcakes when they're both cool.

You might have guessed this, but don't make this if you don't like lemons. I don't know exactly what the original recipe was, but I know they used a lot less lemon. Cowards. You can also use a lot less lemon, I suppose. Coward.

Kada

Put 250 cc/ml of warm water in a bowl and stir in 625 grams of flour. Add 125 cc/ml of melted butter, a pinch of salt, and 75 grams of sugar. Knead the dough, then cover it and leave it somewhere warm for an hour.

Fry 125 cc/ml of melted butter with 125 grams of flour in a pan, stirring until it incorporates and is cooked (raw flour bad, not that that has ever stopped me). Then add 75 grams of sugar.

Once the filling is done and dough is ready, make small flat discs from the dough and shape them around the filling. Then brush with

egg yolk and put in the oven at 180 celsius/356 farenheit/453 kelvin for 15 minutes. They're done once they're golden.

These are a Georgian food. In quarantine my cousin and I got really invested in making foods from other former Soviet Republics. I think we got this recipe from a Georgian Nationalist website. It has become a staple food for me.

Pasta

I have written out a pasta recipe before, but I made another good one recently.

Caramelize an onion with butter and oil. I used half a big one.

When it's almost done, add garlic and Chinese sausage with Sichuan peppercorns. Let them fry, then add a good heap of gochujang, along with a smaller heap of akamiso. Stir them in, let them fry a little, deglaze with cooking sake, then add milk or heavy cream (you don't need to add the sake if you can't have alcohol). Add some garlic powder and salt to taste, and some fish sauce. Add some cheese, stir, then leave it to simmer.

Boil pasta (shapes with more edges are better), then add it in when it's almost soft, along with a small bit of pasta water. Stir, let it simmer so it's soft, then put more cheese on it and serve. If you only have evil plastic cheese, don't bother adding cheese. Though you can if you really want. This is spicy (to mother at least), but if you want it less spicy, you can use non-spicy sausage. But the gochujang is non-negotiable. Using tomato paste works, but it's not as good.

The purple cake of malice

Make a chocolate cake. I'll put the recipe I used, but it can be any recipe, just clarify moist or rich when you're searching. You can also use fuwafuwa, but when you are done it will not be fuwafuwa.

200 grams choco and 120 grams butter in a bowl. You can melt these in the microwave or over water.

In another bowl, add 5 eggs and 120 grams of sugar. Beat until they turn white and your spoon leaves lines in it.

Add 1/5 of this batter to the chocolate bowl and bled them together. Then add this back to the rest of the batter. Now here is the disturbing part- add ube-flavoured condensed milk. Measure with your heart because your soul has no place here. Mix.

Add in 80 grams of flour and 80 grams cocoa. Unsweetened if you value your life. The batter should now be a menacing purple/black colour.

Use a smaller cake pan. You want the cake thick enough you can cut it into two levels after. Bake at 180 celsius/356 farenheit/453 kelvin. Ideally you have enough batter to make at least four layers.

While it's baking, repeat the buttercream recipe from earlier, but don't add lemon- add more ube-flavoured condensed milk. It should glisten blackly when you are through.

When the cake is cool, cut it in half from the side. Does that make sense? Don't cut it into two halves, cut it into layers you can stack on top of each other. Put one layer. Smear ube-flvaoured condensed milk on it. Put another layer. Smear ube-flavoured condensed milk on it. Another layer. More ube-flvaoured condensed milk. However many layers it takes. More ube-flavoured condensed milk on top. Then you add the ube-flavoured buttercream to the entire thing. Coat it completely. You are done, for better or for worse.

This cake could kindly be described as 'sickeningly sweet.' Mother almost gagged when she took a bite. Father loved it, but he also couldn't eat more than a slice a day. My friends also loved it, but one joked about how she wasn't going to be able to eat anything for a week. I was left with two slices and when I took them home, I couldn't. For two days in a row the only thing I ate was one slice of cake because I physically could not make myself eat anything else. This is the richest, moistest, most ube-flavoured cake you will ever make. And it will turn you purple for days. I will not elaborate on this, but it will. I suspect eating the entire thing by yourself could also give you gout. This cake is spiritually American.

That being said, it was sooooo good. On day two of me eating one slice a day, the buttercream had crusted and it added a very nice texture. Definitely not if you don't have a high tolerance for sweet

things, though. I would say this is perfect for an event with friends where you each eat one slice, or for children if you want their parents to hate you. And also if you want them to develop gout later in life.

Anyway, those are recipes you can make for women. ^^ If you try any I hope you like them.

Biowarfare

[image]

'Do no harm.' WRONG. KS-23 shotgun blast to the chest.

There is something so beautiful about watching videos of Palestinians celebrating the missile strikes on Israel. For so long the missiles overhead have only been a sign of fear and death, but now they're a sign of hope. I hope Iran can do this. But in the end this is a reminder to all enemies of America- you gain nothing from taking the 'moral high ground' of not making nuclear weapons. If Iran had nukes, this would not be happening.

Also I wonder if because of the price of oil rising because of America and Israel's attack on Iran, they'll lift some sanctions on Russia and buy oil from them. They're already 'allowing' India to do it (by the way, if your country has to be 'allowed' to purchase a necessary resource by a country that isn't even from the same continent, you *might* just be a puppet). If they do that, they might have to cut support to Ukraina, and with the flagging European support... Hm hmhmhm.
But also, the US isn't having a good time in Iran. This has already been going on longer than they said it would. If they don't choose to go nuclear (and I *really* hope they don't), I don't think they're going to get what they want, which means Trump and company are going to want to do something to salvage America's ego. And he promised to come for Cuba next.

I understand why no one wants to strike America when it would plunge the entire world into chaos and war, but *god* I wish someone would just take the fucking shot already.

—

Anyway, this is the write-up on biological warfare being used in Korea from Chasing Liberty, slightly edited to add context that was in the story. More people read this, so I want to give it a wider audience. Sources will be at the bottom.

So some basic information to start with- in the first winter of the war in Korea, there was an outbreak of smallpox/viral haemorrhagic fever. It didn't start until between 1-2 weeks after the US Army withdrew from the north. The incubation period for smallpox has an average of 7-14 days. Outbreaks were not reported before in the months the US was there, and only broke out in places they had been *in the north.* Not in northern North Pyongan or Chagang, not in far northern North Hamgyong or the area that would become Ryanggang, and not in the South (there were illnesses, but not of this nature). Both Koreans and United Nations soldiers reported seeing Americans spreading feathers in houses and towns (feathers are a good vector for bacteria). There were also plans for biological warfare attacks that the KPA found in Seoul when they first took it, and they matched up well with what happened (you can choose to believe this was just propaganda, but they had reported finding them before the outbreaks, when it seemed like they were going to win before winter; what would be the point of setting up a biowarfare 'false flag' of sorts when they thought they were going to win? Also the fever very much was real, people died from it). A few months after it had been going on, the DPRK complained that it was biowarfare to the UN, but were ignored.

Later, in the winter of 1952, more outbreaks broke out. But these ones came with something more than illness- insects. Starting from the beginning of January, swarms of insects started to be found in Korea in the wake of American planes. Flies, spiders, mites, fleas, some of which later tested positive for things like Vibrio cholera, anthrax, and Pasteurella pestis (plague bacteria). The housefly wasn't supposed to be seen in Korea until May, stable flies weren't supposed to be until April, mosquitoes shouldn't be seen until May, crickets and locusts shouldn't be seen until May and April, ptinid bettles were found in swarms in the open when they are usually confined to dark sheds and storehouses. The springtails that were found in China were a species that hadn't been seen there before. There were also blighted plant leaves, carrying crop-rotting diseases, some of which shouldn't have been seen across the 38th Parallel, let alone in Northeast China. They were dropped over towns and army units, and coincidentally, there were far less cases in 'MiG alley,' the stretch between the Chongchon River and the

Chinese border, where the KPA/PVA/Soviet air force was stationed in force. They were mostly in other northern areas of Korea than that, and behind that zone in China. Most of them were spotted directly after American planes had been reported circling in the might.

Also Ishii Shiro was reported to have visited Korea three times from *January* to March. If you don't know who he is, he was a Japanese scientist that was the director of Unit 731, one of the the Imperial Army's biological warfare units in Manchuria, who was partly responsible for the biowarfare that was used on China in WWII, when plague-carrying fleas were dropped over Chinese cities. Some of the methods used for dropping them were later described by an army man who had been involved in the biowarfare in a Japanese journal in January 1952, and they matched up with some of those being used in Korea.

Many American pilots that were shot down also testified that they had been sent to drop insect bombs, and there were also many stories of Japanese Communists and KPA prisoners being experimented on in Japan both for Operation Bluebird (a mind-control initiative that later became MKUltra) and for biological warfare. The mind-control part at least did objectively happen. There were locations in Europe, the Philippines, and a few other places, including Japan. They were told to 'utilize aliens.' This is knowledge even Wikipedia admits. Many KPA and PVA soldiers also said prisoners were being experimented on in the Geoje Island prison camp.

So there's bare bones context. Now let's get to why I believe it. First, let’s say the stories about Japanese Communists and North Korean POWs being used as test subjects in Japan, Geoje Island POWs being experimented on, and Ishii Shiro visiting Korea are all just rumours (despite there being evidence against that). The fact still stands that America did grant Ishii Shiro and other Unit 731 chiefs amnesty in exchange for their information on germ warfare (and other grisly things). It didn’t come out until decades later, but is now a known fact that they flat out lied about that. They also lied about Japan not using germ warfare on China during WWII when scientists drew comparisons between what had happened then and what was

happening in 1952. It's now known that we did use biological warfare and that the US covered it up. But anyway, let's also say the very suspicious circumstances of the smallpox/viral haemorrhagic fever outbreaks the year before were also just sheer coincidence (despite there being lots of questionable events there).

Second of all, let's not talk about the American pilots much. I wouldn't trust the word of a North Korean/Chinese POW in American hands, so I'll be fair and not trust the word of an American in North Korean/Chinese hands. The only thing I'll say is that there were no signs of torture; while they said they were threatened at the time, some have come forward in their old age to recant that and say they were actually treated well; they were at threat of being court martialled if they didn't repeal their testimony once home, which would have been disastrous for them and their family in that time; and most of them didn't repeal their testimony to the UN, though it was said their legitimacy would be solidified if they did. And later Al Jazeera (decidedly not pro-DPRK) tracked one down, and he said 'I didn't know. But they send it with you.' Also the people responsible for their debriefing when they returned home went on to be part of MKUltra. I am not saying they were brainwashed to repeal. I don't really believe in 'brainwashing' in that sense. It's just one of those 'everything is connected' moments.

So the meat. America started their biowarfare program in 1943. They experimented with germ warfare on their own people in 1950, three months after the war in Korea 'began.' They sprayed San Francisco with two types of bacteria, one causing urinary tract infections, and another that, while not a pathogen, can still cause respiratory illness. At least one person died. They carried out over two hundred of these 'tests' from 1949 to 1969. Also in 1950, pneumonia bacteria was sprayed over Panama City and Florida, and a cancer-causing chemical was sprayed over the Midwest. Also this is one I recently learned about- the US Army sprayed a chemical fog of zinc cadmium sulfide over St. Louis, in a black and working-class neighbourhood in 1953. It causes cancer. Many of them are dying of it now. This isn't conspiracy stuff. It's 'even Wikipedia admits this' stuff. So it's not a matter of 'would they.' Not even counting future claims of other cases of germ warfare, if they did it to their own people, they would do it to the people they committed the

Nogun-ri and Pyongyang massacres on.

So there's all the aberrant insect appearances that I mentioned earlier, appearing months too early, and some not having been spotted in Korea or China beforehand. If you want the full rundown, look at the ISC Commission report (it's very long, so if you're a busy person most of the bulk is in the first few hundred pages; but if you're not willing to read it, don't proclaim biowarfare wasn't used in Korea). There's also the appearances of plague without cases in between Korea and the closest endemic regions in Manchuria and Fukien, as well as blighted oak leaves appearing above the 38th Parallel, where that kind didn't grow. None of these things changed in the future. As in there were no new studies that said, 'actually these appeared here/then all along.' (though if things (global warming) continue, insects are going to keep appearing earlier and earlier). The anthrax studies were actually some of the first really publicly done studies discovering things that would later come to be scientific fact, so it wasn't like they were using information that was already out there. They did conduct these comprehensive studies. Also the US or affiliates have never even tried to launch some mass investigation in the modern day to prove that these diseases and vectors were present all along, which you would think they would do if they were so sure the DPRK and China were lying.

The 'proof' that has all come out against the allegations has been baseless. 'Soviet letters' discovered after the fall of the CCCP said it was all a ploy, but they were hand-copies, and the originals and their reference numbers were never provided. Very convenient that they just so happened to find the personal admittance to that evil scheme that no one else is allowed to see. A book in the name of a Chinese scientist who worked on the case came out after his death saying it was all a false alarm. But it came out *after* his death, and long after he could have moved to America and gotten rich off of that story. No one ever came forward and said he'd hinted it was all overblown before. Two men who have investigated the allegations for years said that if the previously mentioned items were true, it would go against a lot of other evidence, some of which came out publicly after these claims, like some intercepted cables the US released which contained information it wouldn't have made sense for that Chinese scientist not to know about. They actively showed

that the PVA and KPA were being negatively impacted by the germ warfare, so it certainly wasn't a false alarm. And not every report was taken at face value. North Korean investigators reported internally several times that some claims were false when they went to investigate, so that shows that they weren't just trying to pump up outrage (and really, did Koreans need any more reason to be outraged at America? They were living in holes in the ground at this point.)

A couple authors claimed that they had confirmed that an anthrax sample had came from natural Chinese sources, not American, based on a genomic analysis. But they never published this analysis, and an investigator called their source's sources, none of whom actually backed up the claim, and the main one of which said he'd never even heard anything about the analysis. Other Soviet records seem to say the Soviets didn't know if the germ warfare was true, but that the Chinese and North Koreans (the people it was happening to) seemed to believe it was. And Stalin also seemed to believe. Intercepted messages from KPA and PVA soldiers show that they were utterly convinced biowarfare was being used on them. A staunch Hungarian anti-Communist who was in Korea at the time later confirmed he had seen flies in winter, long before they should appear.

No one really claims this, but in case you're thinking 'what if it *was* germ warfare, but they did it to themselves??' That would be incredibly stupid. Most of Korea's hospitals had been bombed, along with water stations, and medicine factories. They had lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and illness spreads most easily among army units with how packed together they are. China was also advancing very fast in the sanitation department, but still had a mostly feudal population. Infecting their own country would just tamper with the part of their supply line that *wasn't* being bombed. Also since they had livestock shortages, all the animal culling they had to do was not good for their food supply. This was also at a time when America was drawing out the ceasefire and trying to gain more land in the deal. If their line had weakened, they could have lost more territory. They did handle the outbreaks well because sanitation was very important to them as recently-feudal countries, but it wasn't a 'haha, if we release this, we can handle it

easily!' situation. Putting aside any beliefs about morality, it would have been risking tactical suicide. I think the fact that America doesn't even claim this (explanations for the positive tests of bodies are usually 'uh, well, they must have infected them themselves after death.') is proof that it's not an option.

So I think at the very least, the outbreaks were real. The Soviet administration as a whole likely wasn't sure if it was really biowarfare, but were happy to say it was since it made America look worse than they already did. But many of them, and the North Koreans and Chinese did seem to believe it truly was germ warfare. Saying it was all some sort of master plot completely invented by them just worked to help the US paint their picture of the sly, slanty-eyed Asian hordes, brutish, but with enough wickedness to infiltrate good American minds and infect with them strange ideas (and if you think I'm exaggerating, look up American Korean War propaganda or WWII anti-Japanese propaganda. Yes, fuck Imperial Japan. But it wasn't the war crimes they were targeting. Even in the 'You poor folks are being used as puppets by your evil commie masters' leaflets, the Korean and Chinese are made to look animalistic.)

You could say, 'okay, with all the destruction of sanitation measures like you just said, doesn't it mean sickness could spread more easily?' Yes. But the way the sickness cropped up in those specific periods, many of the illnesses out of season or area, along with the vectors, with such sudden intensity, is definitely suspicious. The ISC Commission also interviewed dozens of witnesses in both Korea and China who were adamant they saw American planes dropping non-explosive bombs that released insects and other things. Korea was actually in worse straits hygienically the year before because of the aftermath of the tactical withdrawal, and they hadn't rebuilt any of their hospitals yet. Yet aside from the strange winter outbreaks, the spring illnesses weren't reported as out of the ordinary. This is despite the fact that the previous winter and spring had much more troop mobility with new PVA and KPA divisions coming in from China and leaving Korea. Also the same rash of illnesses were never reported in the South (there were outbreaks, but not in the same vein as these ones), even though they had far more foreign troops from different places occupying them. And while they were less

destroyed than the North since their rear wasn't being bombed, they *were* still destroyed. They didn't have hygienic conditions either.

Some people say the Soviet Union vetoing the Red Cross investigation (this hasn't been brought up in Chasing Liberty yet) is proof that they didn't want their lie to be exposed. I have a full rant on this for later, but if you read the UN minutes, they weren't actually vetoing an investigation- they were vetoing a vote without North Korean and Chinese representatives present. They clearly stated this multiple times, along with the fact that it violated the UN Charter. The UN accuses them of having no proof for the charges, and the Soviets pretty much say 'Yeah, we don't. Because it's not our proof. That's why we need their representatives here.' The North Koreans and Chinese were never allowed to speak, but they did make it known that they didn't want the Red Cross to be the one investigating. This is also seen as proof that they're lying. Yet the Red Cross wasn't 'impartial' as the UN was claiming. They were literally part of the organization at war with them. They also had a history of glossing over Nazi concentration camps in WWII. Meanwhile the US admitted in a cable that they didn't want a real investigation because it could cause loss of morale by revealing other things they were doing (chemical warfare. They claimed they weren't doing chemical warfare, but surprise! They were. How *fascinating.* Take a guess on what else Ishii Shiro was responsible for in Manchuria.*)* The International Scientific Commission and the International Association of Democratic Lawyers get accused of being Soviet puppets, but the fact stands that the IADL reported on atrocities in Korea that did later turn out to be true, and none of them ever came forward in the future to say they were bribed or lying. I've said before there is no such thing as being unbiased, and that's true. But I would trust a group of professionals from all over the world who personally investigated with no monetary gain (most of them were from capitalist countries where their work could have got them blacklisted) over the people who were actively bombing Korea. Professor Mori Masataka, who has spent much of his life studying the crimes of Unit 731, including biological warfare, has also visited the DPRK in the modern day to speak to survivors and witnesses, and study the proof they still have, and has also concluded that it was used against them.

Overall I think there's just too many coincidences. It could have been just natural outbreaks with the war bringing new diseases. But when you add the physical proof of the lab reports and autopsy results and collected specimens that shouldn't have been there, and the fact that none of the proof against it is actually verifiable, it really does make it seem like there's something else going on. At the very least, North Koreans and Chinese do wholeheartedly believe it was germ warfare. It has left a deep, deep scar on their psyche. If you've ever heard about how they don't like cold water in China, it's because with the fears of biowarfare, the Communist Party started a mass campaign to boil water before drinking it. That lingers in their culture, just like the war itself, while the US does everything it can to make its people and everyone else forget.

And in the end, that's the final nail of proof for me- the fact that the DPRK and China still remember and memorialize what was done to them, while America tries to erase it, even more than they do with Vietnam and Iraq. With them its distortion, justification, and lies. With Korea it's nothing. Chunks of meeting minutes from those years remain missing, files remain top secret, flight paths are never revealed. It's called the Forgotten War in America for a reason- you only want to forget when you still have something to hide.

In the end, even if it wasn't truly biological warfare, it was the US's fault. They started a war on false pretenses and refused to let it end even when the North Koreans and Chinese were more than willing. Every baby that starved because its mother couldn't get enough nutrients to produce milk, every child that died of exposure in the winter, and every person who died from illness, whether intentional or simply because they were living in caves with all their infrastructure laid waste to, is on *them.* The crimes that have been fully proven without a doubt are more than enough to indict.

ISC report- https://archive.org/details/ISC-Report-on-Bacterial-Warfare

The investigator who called the genomic analysis sources: https://valtinsblog.blogspot.com/2017/04/revealed-suppressed-report-on-1952-us.html?m=1#.WiwJuUqnGUm

Write up on the released intercepted messages with more sources at

the bottom- https://kayej.substack.com/p/a-real-flood-of-bacteria-and-germs?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web&triedRedirect=true

Al Jazeera documentary- https://odysee.com/@swprs:3/Dirty-Little-Secrets-Korea-Biowarfare-AJ-2010:c?lid=

They do a little of the typical saber-rattling of 'North Korea is aggressive' (when really they were just responding to Trump), just so you're aware.

Al Jazeera documentary with the write up at the bottom, with the account of the man whose father was killed by typhoid I mentioned in another author's note:

https://www.aljazeera.com/video/people-power/2010/4/4/dirty-little-secrets

Soviet vetoes meeting minutes- https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.587 https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.590 (this one isn't so important, it's just the wrap up of 'aha, since you refuse an impartial investigation (without having the people who are lodging the accusations present to vote, and carried out by the people bombing those people) clearly you are a filthy liar! I am British, innit.') But there is the interesting second part of the UN dragging their heels on letting less-developed nations and Socialist nations into the UN, while proposing Japan joins just a few months later)

The gaslighting in these is genuinely insane. I know that word gets misused, but that is legitimately what it is. Please read the first one and join me in not understanding how Mr. Malik didn't just start killing people. I'm a fairly calm person, but I would be moved to extreme violence if I was him.

Thomas Powell's book The Secret Ugly: The Hidden History of Germ Warfare in Korea is supposed to be good (his parents were actually involved in breaking the story), but I can't find a link for a free version. ⛩⛩ Here's an interview with him: https://youtu.be/wQjHvQsALv0?si=RyFi-PLyNRo-EwWU

And another with Jeffrey Kaye:

https://youtu.be/vweZtDxeF7M?si=luaiIwybeaOOE5T6

Newspaper summary:

https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/271228

St. Louis chemical test:

https://www.bet.com/article/1u3jx3/inside-the-us-armys-cover-up-of-blanketing-a-black-neighborhood-with-toxins

A little thing about Fort Detrick: https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/15/cia-fort-detrick-stephen-kinzer-228109/

This is completely unrelated, but do you ever think about how the Black Lives Matter movement in America was so large that it spread across the world, causing unrest and demands that the US treat its minorities better, then suddenly covid hit, forcing people to stay inside and not gather together? And it was announced conveniently right before it hit that Fort Detrick was 'suspending' its deadly germ operations after breeches of safety protocols? And also there was an influx of lung-related illnesses in the area at the same time? And how when Biden said covid could be a Chinese bioweapon, China said, 'Okay, come check out our Wuhan lab and we can check out Fort Detrick.' And then he clammed up. And how there are apparently a few interesting e-mails involving American capitalists, covid, and Israel in the Epstein Files… Not necessarily saying this is true. Just one of those things nya…

mournfully I wish an American military pilot would crash in *my* country. But I'm not going to say why.

Pink Creatures

[image]
[image]

Hae and her team of pink creatures. And... the horse. Don't blame me for drawing the Miltank udders. Blame whoever designed them.

My battle to make her look a little chubbier. I'm really proud of how her sweater turned out. ^^

My cat's newest passion is to fall over so I can smack him as hard as possible without hurting him. I need to play him like drums for him to start purring. Then he weakly scrabbles at the floor like he's trying to escape being savaged, but if I stop doing it he starts screaming for me to start again. This is the same cat that won't tolerate me gently stroking him or cuddling with him on my lap, so I'm starting to think he might just be a masochist.

Occasionally I use my VPN to visit American sites directly and I regret it every time. Videos of American soldiers dancing as they deploy to Iran and instead of anyone saying that is monstrous of them, they are all saying their soldiers are 'soft' or 'they're going to do something so scary, let them have fun!' I hope you will kindly permit me to have fun when your children are returned to you in pieces. Because I will be having a lot of it. And yet somehow I feel the reaction would be different, despite the fact that I am not the one travelling overseas to murder innocent people.

People saying it's a good thing we're stationing long-range missiles make me hostile. 'They're not going to be used for offense, they're for when North Korea attacks.' WHY would North Korea want to attack? What would they get out of that?? They can't occupy us, they've never expressed any desire to occupy us, we don't have any resources to take, and bombing us would just start a confrontation with America. Yes they would strike Japan if it was used in an

American attack against them. But the solution to *that* is to remove the bases that would be their targets. Yet the people who support the missiles almost never support getting rid of US bases. They act like the DPRK has some kind of inherent hostility against us, which isn't true. There's prejudices yes (for good reason), but we somehow have even more prejudice against them when *we* were the occupiers. They're not going to just decide to bomb Japan for revenge, that's the 'we did this to you so there's no way you wouldn't so the same thing if you had the chance' mindset. They just want the government to stop rearming and raising tensions, which they consistently refuse to do. If we stopped being an unsinkable American aircraft carrier, they wouldn't give a damn about us. We could probably even have our own weapons without them caring if we weren't run by genocide deniers that are committed to starting wars with the people around us on the order of white men across the sea that pointlessly bombed thousands to death and treat our women as free to use. How am I, the sacred war of justice supporter that can't even speak Japanese right yet, less committed to getting Japan bombed than your average salaryman?

Sorry if all my notes seem dark and angry lately. It is because I am getting darker and angrier.

White Day!

[image] [image] [image]

The promised Ukranada White Day art. ^^
I like doing both flag designs for her. Also a nice close-up of her full arm tattoos.

Canada is the type to drop his utensil really loudly in a fancy restaurant, then when he comes up from getting it, he smashes his head on the table and clatters the plates. Ukraina is the type to shout an insult across the room at anyone that laughs or looks at him for too long. Cringe malewife and his girlboss. Canada has social anxiety, but he definitely should have social anxiety.

Unrelated historical fact- Canada gave shelter to Ukrainian Nazis after World War II so that they couldn't face punishment from the Soviet Union for massacring Jews and Communists and fighting with Germany. They used them to fight Communists in their own country. Whenever a diaspora in any country hates the place they came from en masse, you can usually look a few generations back and find Adolf Hitler's best friend.

I'm not sure if I've told this story before, but it always makes me happy. I was in the city once and a foreign man came up to me in a cafe and complimented my keffiyeh, and asked if I had Palestinian friends. I told him no, I'm just an anti-Imperialist who supports Palestine, and he smiled and told me he was from Iraq and it was good to see people here supporting them. Then a few minutes later he came back and gave me a string of wooden beads and told me it was for protection, and he wanted me to have it. I searched it up and I think they're Islamic prayer beads. They're olive shaped and made of cracked wood, and have three strings hanging from them with another bead on each end. I keep them with my omamori and lucky knots. I will never be anti-immigration because immigrants have never been anything but nice to me. Another fun city interaction was an African man who who said he liked my Soviet choker and told me about how he went to school in the CCCP. I

don't like the city, but you do meet very many people there.

Also the picture from the At Your Fingertips Chasing Liberty chapter.

There is going to be an Israeli false flag attack on Canada. When you hear about a terror event there committed by 'Muslims' or 'Iran,' just know that it was Israel.

The Wrong Brother (One-shot)

This is the flashback part of a chapter from Chasing Liberty, but it works as a standalone. So if you don't read Chasing Liberty (read Chasing Liberty) you can still get to know a little bit of China and South lore. If you just read that chapter you can skip to the end for extra information about their dynamic. ^^

1938

Stand, pace, sit, stand, pace, sit.

South was starting to feel like North pacing the floor of the-

"No, no, get it together, South." He slapped his cheeks. "No thinking of stuff like that when you need to be calm."

Calm, he was calm. Why wouldn't he be calm? It wasn't like he was going to be meeting the only other Countryhuman he'd ever met or anything. Well, the only other one that wasn't-

Not thinking about it!

Stand, pace-

Door!

Hearing the polite knock, he shot for the door of his suite, then stopped. Did he get it? Did he wait for someone else to? He reached a hand out, shaking.

'Three, two-' He yanked it open, blinking at the person on the other side.

He blinked back, tilting his head and smiling warmly. "Korea, I presume?"

"I, uh, yes!" South realized he'd been slightly hunched over,

gripping the doorknob, and shot up. “Korea! That’s me!”

The name still felt clunky, even when the members of the Provisional Government had been using it for the past couple years.

‘South, I’m South,’ he wanted to say to them. *‘I’m only half of Korea! My North is out there!’*

He thought. He hoped. He prayed. ***‘Please.’***

He had told them. He’d *told* them he was missing North and he hadn’t been alone in there at first. He didn’t think they believed him. They wouldn’t call him South. They thought being locked up for so long had made him go weird.

But Kim Ku had promised to look. He’d promised to find North. He’d promised to bring him back to South like North had promised to come back. Hopefully Japan’s invasion of China wasn’t distracting him.

China!

The man was still standing patiently in the doorway. “I brought gifts.” He hefted the bamboo basket in his hand.

“Um.” South looked both ways down the hall. “W-Where’s Mister Pak?”

“I thought we could talk alone.” China was still smiling. “Is that alright?”

“Um…” *Was* it alright? He wasn’t really allowed to talk to people. If Japan found out he was here…

But the Provisional Government had set this up, and one said he knew China, sort of, so this was probably fine, right?

“Of course,” he said, trying to sound calm. “Yeah.”

He continued to stand in the doorway. China’s smile widened.

“Oh, right, sorry.” South flushed, ducking inside with the other

man following.

Maybe the years locked up *had* made him go weird.

China laughed, but for some reason it didn't sound like he was laughing at South. "No need for apologies."

He held the gift basket out, and South blanked. Etiquette, etiquette. Korean etiquette or Chinese? He'd been taught Chinese etiquette for this specifically, but now it was all fleeing his head like rabbits and he couldn't remember if accepting with both hands was just a Korean thing or not and oh God China was going to think he was rude and leave-

"Don't worry about etiquette, by the way," China said airily. "You can take the gifts out now, too."

South sagged in relief, taking the basket with both hands, the way he took stuff from Kim Ku and the others. After a panicked second of hesitation, he added a small bow. The men said since he was their Countryhuman, he didn't have to bow to them, but China was another country, so he should probably show proper respect.

"Thanks. I, uh, got you something, too, by the way."

Well, the Provisional Government had. He couldn't really go shopping or anything.

He set the basket down, heading to the desk, his hands shaking as he pulled out a black lacquer box to present to China, who took it with both hands. Chinese etiquette? Or was he just better at foreign manners than South?

China opened the box, examining the glossy smoking pipe in it. He uttered a soft laugh that made South nervous.

"Do you, um-" He tried to make his swallow as quiet as possible. "Do you like it?"

"Did you make it?" the man asked, examine the pipe.

"Um, no." South rubbed his arm. "B-But it's briar."

Why did he stutter? He'd never stuttered with North, but it just kept happening with everyone else.

He nervously watched China while he ran his finger down the curved stem.

"It's lovely," he said after a moment, smiling genuinely. "I actually needed a new pipe. I'm sure I'll get good use from it."

South sagged with relief. "Oh, good. Um, you can sit."

China sat at the small table by the paper-covered window, blinking at him, and the Korean quickly realized he should sit, too, practically throwing himself into the chair across from him.

"I asked your friends what you liked before I got here." The other man reached into the basket, pulling out a few bottles. "They said you fancy sweet drinks and cakes, so I brought you some plum juice, chrysanthemum tea, and some extra sweet huangjiu rice wine. And a red bean bun, of course."

He set the little package in front of South, who eagerly pulled it close. He preferred the little European cakes he was sometimes given, and the rush of sweetness that came with them, but he would never turn down food. It was still a novelty, getting to eat whenever and almost whatever he wanted.

"Thanks," he said, biting into the still-warm bun.

"I'll pour us drinks." China went to the glass-faced drink cabinet of the parlour, coming back with crystal glasses.

South watched him, chewing on his bun. The man looked older than him, physically twenty-sixish, maybe, though who knew how old he really was. Japan had looked maybe thirty-five, but he'd actually been-

'Not. Thinking. About. It.'

China wasn't wearing as nice of clothes as he had expected. While South was wearing white silk with a blue jeogori over it, patterned with darker embroidery, the man was only dressed in a bluish

uniform and hat, the brim of which covered his flag design. It didn't even look like an officer's uniform.

He was tall, a *lot* taller than South. And slender, with long limbs. The Korean was kind of jealous, sitting up straighter in his chair.

He was sort of jealous of his face, too. His complexion looked really nice, and he had high cheekbones, even if his cheeks looked a little hollow, like Nor- like hollow cheekbones looked. But on an adult, it made him look less malnourished and more dramatic.

South poked his own round cheek, feeling it squish. He guessed he was just happy that he wasn't starving anymore, but he wished he could be well-fed *and* pretty, like China.

"What drink would you like to share?" the man asked, swishing back over. *And* he was graceful. Some things really were unfair.

South almost pointed at the plum juice before his finger curled in.

That would be way too immature, right? The Provisional Government people always drank alcohol with each other and with him when they visited. Alcohol was a business drink and this was… business? He thought it was, anyway.

So he pointed at the rice wine, even though he didn't really like the way alcohol burned, or how even the sweet stuff was still kind of bitter.

Actually, if the man had asked the Provisional Government about the stuff he liked, he was surprised they hadn't told him he didn't like alcohol. He'd gotten hungover once and it had sucked. Like *really* sucked.

China examined him for a minute, making him nervous, then smiled, setting South at ease as he poured them each a glass. He had a nice smile, warm and friendly.

He had called the Provisional Government South's friends, and that felt good. South had never had any friends. Maybe China could be…

“Cheers.” China held up his glass and South clinked his against it with only a few seconds of panic.

“Yeah, ch-cheers,” he said, bracing himself before taking a sip of the rice wine.

‘Eugh.’ It burned, like he’d known it would, though he did his best to hide it.

“Do you like it?” China asked, watching him.

“Yeah, it’s really good.” South mustered a smile. “Thank you.”

The man smiled. “I’m sure you’ll get as much use out of it as I will my gift.”

“I will.” He could just give the rest to Mister Pak as thanks for standing outside his door all day. He took another drink to be polite.

“You’re not worried about poison?”

“Um.” South blinked, holding his drink in his mouth. “Wha?”

China’s lips curled over the rim of his own glass. “A joke.” He took a little sip, which meant it probably had just been that.

“Oh. Haha,” the Korean quickly laughed, taking another drink. It didn’t taste sweet at all, and he kind of wanted to ask the man if he was sure he’d gotten extra sweet.

But everyone had stressed that he had to be really polite. China was powerful and could be a big help against Japan (and they *were* kind of crashing in his country). So South made himself take another drink without making a face.

“So.” China swirled the deep golden liquid in his glass. “What’s your favourite colour?”

South paused at the random question. No one had ever asked him that before. Did he even have a favourite colour?

The sky above as North hustled him up a tree, the scrap he could see out his barred window, the wide expanse that had made him burst out sobbing when he had been pulled out of the cargo trunk, only setting foot in China for a brief second before collapsing to his knees, overwhelmed.

'Free, finally free.'

"I guess blue," he said shyly. "Sky blue."

"Why?"

"Uh, I just… like it," South murmured, fidgeting with his glass. "I… didn't get to see the sky much until recently."

"Courtesy of our mutual antagonist, I suppose."

He nodded quietly.

China didn't poke anymore at that, asking instead, "Do you prefer silk or cotton?"

South was more confident on that one. "Silk, definitely."

China kept asking him questions, nothing really important, just things like:

"What's your favourite food?" "Those little French cakes with jam."

"When it comes to meals, do you feel flavour or presentation is more important?" "Uh, flavour? But I think it needs to look nice, too, or you won't want to taste it."

"How do you like your tea?" "Um, with honey."

"What do you think of Trotsky?" "Who?"

"Something I wish *I* could say."

It was actually kind of fun. South hadn't really thought about the answers to most of them before, even though so many of them were mundane. China wasn't as scary as he thought he would be, aside

from that little poison comment. South liked the way he smiled while he talked, genuinely invested in what he was saying.

"What do you think of the arts?"

South brightened. "I love art! Mister Ri brought me a few. They're on the wall."

He pointed to the landscapes and still lifes- Mount Kumgang, Seoul, Mount Jiri, the Taedong River, Paektusan- little snippets of a country he had still never seen, aside from glimpses out a window and while being ferried across the border. Places he hoped to see with North someday.

China had seemed to brighten, too. "Do you paint?"

"Um, no, but I want to try." South rubbed his arm. "Mister Ri promised to send me some paints and stuff. And- And I like to sing and dance."

That… was a little embarrassing to admit. But he felt like the man had almost seemed… disappointed in his answer.

"Show me."

"I, uh… I don't think I'm drunk enough for that yet."

China laughed, making South flush with accomplishment. "Well then tell me when you are."

South poured another glass, wanting to get drunk now to gain the courage, even if it gave him a hangover tomorrow. He'd only ever sang for North before. Maybe if he did it for China, he could be bold enough to sing for Kim Ku and Mister Pak and the others. It might help take their minds off the invasion.

Should he ask about that? Was it rude to question your ally about the fact that he was being invaded as they spoke?

South was mulling this as China leaned over the table.

"So, I've heard a little rumour."

"About what?"

"I hear that the Korean Countryhuman is waging a resistance war against Japan," the man said casually, trailing a finger over the table, examining it for dust. "Leading armies in Manchuria and Korea." He cut his eyes to him. "Is that true?"

South's eyes widened. "Me? Fighting in a war?"

That sounded more like something North would do, and for a moment, hope flickered in his heart.

But no. His brother wasn't really the type of person to lead armies. Army commanders should be charismatic and confident, and while North was definitely the second one, he was too gloomy and quiet to make people listen to him.

'Only you.' Only him. And it had lost him his brother.

It was something his brother would *want* to do, not something he was capable of.

But still South asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"Just around," China said idly. "But I suppose my information was wrong. Pity."

The hope curled up and died. Of course, it couldn't be North. If North were out there leading armies, he would have come back to rescue South. He would have come back even if he was alone. The only alternative was that he was…

'Maybe that would be better.'

South was horrified at the thought, shoving it away with all his might, taking another swig of not-so-extra sweet huangjiu to take the edge off the bitter voice. It hadn't meant it.

"Do you have any intentions to fight?" China asked casually, thankfully distracting him.

South laughed nervously. "I'm not… really a 'fighting' person.

That's what Mister Kim Ku and the others are doing."

"I see." China took a sip from his drink, which was somehow still mostly full.

The Korean twiddled his thumbs in his lap, unable to tell what the other man was thinking. "So… are you saying that *you* fight?" He looked at the blue uniform with new eyes.

China smiled. "Occasionally."

South couldn't imagine that. Being alone with Japan was bad enough, but being on a battlefield with hundreds, maybe thousands of people trying to kill you?

"But isn't that, well… scary?"

The dark-red-skinned man laughed lightly, taking another sip of his wine. "I suppose it might be, if I were afraid of dying."

Blinking, South asked, "You're not afraid to die?"

"I have many goals. Living for nothing has never been one of them."

There was something sharp this time about China's smile, and his eyes almost seemed to… glow. The intensity in them made South lean back a little, suddenly nervous.

"*Victory* is," China said, his voice low. "Liberation is. For *all* of us."

"Oh," South said, unsure of what else he could say. "Well… I really hope you win, then."

China examined him, his eyes almost seeming to pierce into South's soul.

Then he sat back, his voice light again. "I will. More wine?"

South let him refill his glass. That had been… weird. He thought. Maybe other Countryhumans were just like that.

Aside from the little bit of weirdness, he liked China. He made jokes and told little stories as they ate the steaming bowls of rice noodles that Mister Pak brought them, and even plucked one of his pork slices up to place it in South's bowl.

And he looked him in the eyes. Even if China had… kind of an intense stare, it was still nice to have someone look directly at him. The Provisional Government men were always bowing their heads and dodging his face, even Mister Ri Dong-nyeong, the Chairman. South knew it was polite, but it always made him think of those nurses, pretending he didn't exist as they treated his bleeding back. And Japan. The way he would stare through you instead of at you.

The only one that had ever looked him in the eyes before was North. And even if it made him squirmy to have someone that wasn't his brother stare at him so directly, it was still… nice.

And when South finally got drunk enough that he was filled with the urge to sing, China joined in, teaching him a Chinese song, something about an international… something. It was fun, anyway. More fun than South had had in... a long time. Maybe ever. Though of course he wished his brother were here.

God, he wished he could do this with North. Get drunk and stuff themselves on noodles and cake, sing at the top of their lungs and fall into the big soft bed and sleep with their backs pressed against each other like they always had, except this time uninjured and full and happy and *together-*

"When the tears start to flow, that's usually the time to put down the bottle."

South was vaguely aware of his fingers being unclasped from the neck of the huangjiu before he could pour the last of it into his glass, and someone straightening him up before he slumped forward into them.

"North," he murmured into their chest, clutching at his cotton shirt.

"Is that someone I should know?" China asked.

Right. Not North. North was still gone. He had left.

Suddenly, South wanted to tell China that. He wanted to tell him all of it, the beatings, the shack, Japan, the March First Movement, that small cement room where he had- North. He thought this man with his sharp eyes would believe him. He could tell him it was awful that his brother had left him and reassure him that he was alive, that he would come back.

But his tongue was too tired to do more than mumble an incoherent response, and all he wanted was to curl up and sleep. The bed felt soft as China helped him into it, tucking the blanket around him.

He would tell him in the morning, when he wouldn't embarrass himself. Maybe he could convince the man to stay for a bit and keep him company. They could sing more and maybe he could help South learn how to paint. Hadn't Mister Pak said that the Chinese Nationalists might move to Chongqing if Japan took any more land? That meant China would be nearby. That meant they could see each other more often.

South could finally have a friend.

When he woke up in the morning, his head was pounding from what was only his second real hangover, and his mouth tasted like gravel.

And he was alone.

Totally unrelated fun fact- China doesn't smoke and never has.

China is sort of South's worse nightmare. He is, for all intents and purposes, someone who should love South and at least not care about North. It's well known that he loves the performing arts, and South is a performer. They both love dramas and music and dance and plays and art. Aside from music, North only cares about the message behind art, and doesn't have any interest in creating any of his own. He is, in South's eyes and what he thinks should be in China's eyes, boring. China is also

refined and prideful, and even if he doesn't swagger around like America does, that does still come through. North is someone that refuses to let arrogance stand (because he needs to be the most prideful person in the room). China doesn't tolerate slights and South knows that North is the type to slight even allies. When CCCP showed up in their country to tell them about the Division, he was rude and aggressive to him, despite the fact that he was more powerful than them, and he didn't stop even after they came to their agreement that he wouldn't fight against it, and accepted the Soviet as his comrade.
So South has fully convinced himself that the only reason China could have 'chose North over him' to fight in the Great Fatherland Liberation War personally is because he was made to by CCCP as a Soviet puppet, and if he just got the chance to know South better, he'd love him and want to be *his* friend instead. When China eventually recognizes South Korea, he thinks 'now's the time' (especially because America told him that North and China don't visit each other personally anymore). South was so excited to see him because he knew China had seen sense and realized he was better than North in every way.

Then they finally meet and China *hates* him. He smiles and he's polite, but the way he cracks his eyes at him occasionally and the little threats he gives make it clear that he does not like South. Which is completely confusing to South. China abandoned his brother, he's 'not Communist' anymore, right? So why doesn't he like him better? He's *supposed* to like him better. South is more useful to him economically, his culture is more fun, *he* is more fun. He's seen China interact with other countries in the United Nations now, he knows he should like someone like him. He likes Namibia, the flashy party girl that loves fashion, he likes Cuba, someone into dance and music, he likes Peru, who's a singer and artist. Philippines has even told him they sang karaoke together once, and they have tense relations. Meanwhile he won't even join South for a proper meal during their diplomatic meetings. And he doesn't even usually *attend* diplomatic meetings. He leaves them to his officials. He only seems to show up himself if he wants to vaguely threaten South into something.

And then on top of that, two decades after he cut his brother off, he's back in Pyongyang every year on his birthday. He literally had the perfect chance to choose South over North and he *still* chose his brother again. He chose boring, rude, aggressive North over bubbly, fun South that everyone loves.

You might be picking this up, but he has a very bad complex. China is essentially his... not arch nemesis, but maybe his white whale. Because in South's view, everyone in the world loves him (or at least who he pretends to be) more than North, except for all the 'brainwashed Northerners who *would* like him better if they were unbrainwashed.' And China, the one person who seems like there's no way he could love North more than him. So he despises China for that, but he still very much seeks his favour and keeps inviting him to stay the night or go to a banquet or karaoke with him, even when America says it's best if he doesn't. Because he can't fathom that someone would actually still choose North over him.

North for his part is convinced that whenever China visits South, he gossips about him and acts just as friendly towards him as he does to North. In his mind China drapes himself over South and teases him, too, and it makes him grind his teeth. China does nothing to dissuade him of thinking this and actively encourages it. 'Your brother and I were talking about you last week.' *tense* 'What did he say?' *innocently* 'Oh, nothing.' (spoke maybe twenty sentences to South and three of them were threats) He will disparage North to America sometimes to keep up his act, but he doesn't do it to South since he hopes they'll be Reunified someday, and doesn't want Korea having those memories (though there is a chance how menacing he can be perhaps influenced how afraid Korea was of China at first in Warring Pyongyang). Also the reason he feels comfortable being menacing to South is because he knows he doesn't really have the power to do anything about it. 'This deal is going to go through even if you tell your President I implied I poisoned your drink because it will make him money.'

China doesn't actually even hate South. He doesn't have

halfway feelings towards people. He either loves them, despises them, or is entirely neutral. And he doesn't love South because he hurt his friend, but he also can't hate him because North loves him and they should be Reunified one day, and then he'll be a part of his friend. So he is entirely neutral towards him, something that would honestly distress South even more to hear. China is uninterested in him. Somehow he finds him utterly boring. But not his uncreative, too serious, unstable brother.

This is because China doesn't like artistic or talented people. He likes *creative* people. And the creation has to have real passion behind it. North isn't artistic at all, but he *is* creative, a creator, and *very* passionate. China also likes unhinged people. And while South is uhinged (most Countryhumans are), he isn't the same flavour of unhinged as North (or China himself). And while him and South are both 'performers' who wear masks, he doesn't like people that wear masks for boring reasons, like being liked or convincing themselves they're good people. On the surface, it does seem like South should be someone that China is naturally drawn towards getting along with. But on a deeper level (the deeper level that South never considers because he tries to keep everything surface level and hide anything deeper than the mask), South is basically the antithesis to everything China is interested in. You can see the exact moment in this chapter where he basically becomes nothing to him. China is very good a seeing beneath the mask. Which is why North is his best friend and South is just another actor.

Also China bringing more rice to Cuba while Russia's getting oil in! China and Russia lovers vindicated once more.

Handsy

[image] [image] [image] [image]

This is why Russia says in Safeway Pyongyang that Belarus says he gets too handsy when he's drunk. The moment alcohol hits his system, his family members become cats that he needs to pet right now (and so do cats and Hae). Krim scene where he comes home, slams open the door with a bottle in hand and looms menacingly like a stereotypical drunk abusive father scene, and Krim's face pales as she goes 'Oh no' because she knows exactly what's about to happen. He staggers into the light and he's actually grinning widely as he launches himself at her and tackles her to the floor where he proceeds to hug her the same way I hug my cat. And Krim sighs because she knows he's going to pass out that way so she has to sleep on the floor tonight.

I drew Russia with his sweater on, but Belarus is one of the few people he takes it off around since he knows she won't judge him. While he's one of the people she covers her scars around so he doesn't feel bad about them. Bela is drinking квас by the way.

Also America with broken legs. And possibly also broken neck, I think. Aren't we all glad I don't use just a plain white background anymore. Rejoice! Bisexual colour gradient for everyone! Even the homophobes!

Also I added this to a recent Chasing Liberty chapter, but I will add it here, too.

Jin-suk. <3 Before and after SH. She can never wear the pink blouse her mother made for her again, no matter how hard she tries, so SH took the fabric and incorporated it into a new one.
If you don't read Chasing Liberty, the context is that Yun Jin-suk is a young girl who was horribly assaulted by American soldiers, and SH and Kangwon had to induce a miscarriage in her at eight months. And SH takes her under her wing to make sure she recovers.

Her, Han-jin and Tae-min are some of my favourite side characters. And Kim Yong-hwan, of course. And Choe Kang-ok. And also every side character I write.
I wrote a post-Chasing Liberty one-shot involving North Pyongan, Tae-min, and Han-jin. It made me bawl lying awake and thinking about it. It will be inflicted on everyone soon (threat)

America's Ghosts

[image] [image] [image]

Spoilers for the latest chapter of Chasing Liberty! (Saving Grace) If you're reading it, go read that first. ^^

America wasn't always violent with women (well, with the women he's with, he was murdering Indigenous women fairly early into his colonization of America). It just got to a point where having them love him wasn't exciting enough. And then neither was making them believe things that weren't true. Or insulting them. Or consented to pain in the bedroom. And then eventually hitting them against their will wasn't enough either, and he had accidentally choked his girlfriend to death for forgetting dinner. Oops. But it brought that spark back.
He didn't use to go through so many women because he used to have the excitement of colonization and war, and turning America into an Empire. It was just past mid-1800s when he started beating his partners against their will. He killed the first one himself at the end of that century (before that, the women he beat were disposed of, just not by him; can't have them walking around telling anyone that). It got worse after the war in Korea as he no longer involved himself in wars on the ground, so he needed to look for more excitement. But he still had CCCP. After he collapses and America is unchallenged, there's less and less to excite him, so he always has a full-time girlfriend. He sleeps around a lot, too, but he doesn't get violent with one-time women unless they ask for it (a reminder that a man who beats you inside the bedroom will also beat you outside of it one day). It's only his long-term girls he abuses outright. He doesn't exactly plan to do it, but he's aware he has a temper and can't help doing what he wants (even worse nowadays without the threat of CCCP to rein him in). And if they make him angry, or someone else does, then he's going to want to hurt them.

The one on the right is her if she never met America. Her make-up is heavy, but natural, and she prefers high-necked dresses (which were both the average style in America at the time). America

doesn't necessarily just make his women cake on make-up. If he targets a girl that already wears heavy make-up, he'll tell her he prefers her 'natural' (but how men mean natural, so mascara, subtle lipstick, foundation or powder, and light blush, don't you dare have any body hair or pores). It's not so much about whether a woman looks better with make-up to him or not, but about control, and usually happens in the early stages as he tests how much she'll push back on him. Girls that give in too quick are boring, but girls that fight back too much are unattractive. He wants spine because he enjoys breaking it, but doesn't want too much of it.

Angela was a very bright girl who liked sneaking out to go to events, and despite being sweet, had a spine. She likely would have ended up being a suffragette, despite having no interest in politics when America met her. It was at one of the parties she snuck out to that she met him. He targeted her because she was in the corner stuffing refreshments in her purse. She was sixteen. She wasn't the first girl he dated that he abused, but she was the first one he killed (personally). If you read Chasing Liberty, you know it was because the Panic of 1893 had him on edge, then Britain sent him a letter mocking him for the end of his Golden Age that pushed him over it. When he came home, Angela had forgotten to thaw the chicken for dinner. And that was the final straw.

I made Angela's features more cherubic, small, squished, childlike (because she died at eighteen), but her stronger face shape and hair are based off the Gibson Girl, sort of the ideal American woman of the 1890s. And by that I mean I based her off of Evelyn Nesbit, the model for the Gibson Girl. In an echo, Evelyn was groomed at fourteen by an adult man, who then drugged and raped her at sixteen. Her husband killed him (yay!) in the future, and was sent to a mental asylum (not yay). Evelyn carried the stigma of this for the rest of her life, despite being a victim. The article I found said she was seen as a 'fatal beauty.' Like it was her fault.
Anyway, I borrowed her face shape, hair, and figure (slender but voluptuous) as the Gibson Girl was seen as the ideal woman of the 1890s. America has this sort of preternatural sense for what's going to be popular, and is very often ahead of the curve (some of this is people copying him, especially modern day with the internet). The Gibson Girl was made after Angela's death, but part of her

popularity came from America's interest in the image (and the woman it was modelled after; not to make Miss Evelyn's life worse, but... He's definitely slept with every female 'sex symbol' (bleh) of his nation. Not abused them directly, but how do you say no to your country, even if you want to?).
There's also this edge of irony where the Gibson Girl was portrayed as more equal to men than in the past (though never involved in politics or the suffragette movement, of course, politics are nasty and unladylike and it has nothing to do with controlling women, nope), and more educated. Yet America overlooks those parts to focus on the physical.
Angela doesn't haunt him the way Grace does. It's not *her,* it's how Britain 'made' him kill her. I think in his memories, she doesn't have those cherub features. She looks like the Gibson Girl.

Grace </3
If she hadn't met America, she would have served in Korea as an army nurse, then went home to work in a hospital. She would still be a bubbly, slightly morbid woman that loves make-up and trends, and so still would've dyed her hair at some point. But she wouldn't have enough money to keep dyeing it, and with no one punishing her for not being blonde, it wouldn't be as important. She wouldn't risk dying her eyebrows, and would get to keep the pink lipstick she likes. I do unfortunately think she's the type of woman that would've ended up being taken advantage of by a man no matter what. She was vulnerable, naïve, and wanted a life of luxury. That attracts men with bad intentions. The curse on the women in her family isn't real, but Grace believes that it is. Sometimes that's enough to complete a self-fulfilling prophecy. But maybe if she'd been in a less vulnerable place (America got to her at nineteen, very soon after losing her brother in WWII, and her father murdering her mother then himself), or if she'd been among friends, she might have been saved.

She does haunt America. Outside of Y/N, she is the only one of his victims that does, the only one whose face and name he hasn't forgotten, even decades later. Because her and Y/N were the only ones that got away.

Grace is the reason SH really took Y/N under her wing once she

found out she was abused. She couldn't help that American woman back then (she'll never know that she *did*), but she can help this one (if she's not a spy). Sometimes SH still wonders what happened to her. But she'll never know. With America gone, she's the only one that even knows Grace Hartman ever existed.

Also we're getting consent education in schools now (yay!) and men are, predictably, angry. Japanese women need to get more violent now. Actually *all* women need to get more violent now.

The Idiots

[image] [image] [image]

Based off of that one Kirara and Hakari panel. Two collective brain cells in their relationship. Nipponia might know how to code and Russia might be a chess master, but this does not mean they are intelligent.

Kangwon is not included in the 'idiots' in the chapter title. I just wanted to draw him with a Vulpix because someone wanted me to draw him with a fox awhile ago. I am playing Pokemon Platinum (game made in 2009) again, and when I was looking at the region selector, one was the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Didn't expect to cry over Gaddafi while playing with my fictional pets. ㅠㅠ

Lore I've never explained: Nipponia is not transgender. Nipponia just used to be a man. Vietnam is transgender. Most of the world does not know this, but she is. A Countryhuman can't change their body at will, and usually won't change with a flag change. Philippines with her inverted flag is still the same person. Nipponia only changed in the 90s because the flag change coincided with another suicide attempt. He was trying to take responsibility by hoping that if he killed himself the flag change would form a new Japan, and the country wouldn't crumble. Alas. Get 16-year old nekomimified.
Vietnam's flag didn't change and her nation didn't change. She just took advantage of joining the Soviet Union to be like 'Whoops, looks like I'm a woman now. How random.' Because it's more socially acceptable for a Countryhuman to change genders by mystical, uncontrollable means than because of who they are. She doesn't hide that she's transgender from friends, just from the world at general. Cuba actually knew beforehand. Except Korea refuses to understand the concept.
blankly 'You used to be a man and now you're a woman. That happens to Countryhumans sometimes.'
'Yeah, but that's not what happened to me. It wasn't magical Countryhuman stuff. I chose to be a woman.'

'...You are a woman.'
'Yeah, I know. But I'm a transgender woman.'
'You have a woman's body now. You're a woman.'
'I'm not taking my pants off to prove a point.'
'If you did, I would kill you.'
Then Vietnam just decides to leave it at that, unsure if this can truly be called 'allyship.'

The author reason behind this is that my gendering of countries is based purely on vibes, and I can picture Vietnam as equally male and female. So she gets hit with the transgender hammer so I can have both.

The Iran invasion is sick and twisted, but really showing that 'American military might' doesn't actually exist. Americans like to talk up their military, but for all their fancy equipment and money, they really don't win wars. They just say they do. Like how they say they won the space race for landing the first man on the moon when the Soviet Union did everything else first. Or how they say they won World War II when the Soviets did most of the fighting, and Japan was ready to surrender when they declared war. Or they change the goalposts. They went into Korea to destroy it. They couldn't. Even with complete naval and air superiority, they couldn't. So they change the goalposts and say they only went there in a police action to 'drive the North back, ehe.' Even though it was clear at the time that they wanted to wipe the North out completely and only retreated when the Chinese came. And then that MacArthur and others were pretty much openly campaigning to expand the war to China, which is part of the reason why the US refused to sign an armistice for so long while also maintaining their destructive carpet bombings and naval blockade- because they had been thwarted in pure force, so they wanted to wear them out and force them to surrender that way. But the DPRK and China carried out a protracted war and still managed to overcome several of the US's demands in the talks. That's why the DPRK says it won the war. Because it did. America came to destroy them, and it couldn't. Just like Vietnam. Which is why all American Vietnam War movies go 'we won the battle, just not the war!' I don't know, I think if you won as many battles as your movies say, then you would have won the war. Even in a place like Iraq, where they ostensibly got what

they wanted, it wasn't clean or easy, and the war didn't *really* end. America is only powerful in its political clout and the threat of nuclear bombs. That's why they usually depend on funding regime change operations and genocidal sanctions to topple nations. Almost every time they have a *real* war, they get trounced. But they need to keep starting them because capitalism can't live off American blood alone- it needs to expand. If they ever get the outright war with China or Russia that they want, America will be obliterated. Unfortunately it would likely come at the cost of the world because they're genocidal freaks.

Pulgasari

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

North and his complete refusal to believe in myths or cryptids vs his deep hidden (not very well) affection for mythological Korean creatures.
Him saying Pulgasari is a national hero in Warring Pyongyang is just his sense of humour- blunt statements/outright lies that are completely indistinguishable from how he normally talks. Example- 'You just bit me!' 'That didn't happen.' Unfortunately that sense of humour doesn't work well with Canada, who is both gullible and a liberal (undergoes lobotomy when it comes to 'enemy' countries, 'North Korea thinks they found a unicorn' vibes), so he overheard that and now believes Korea genuinely thinks Pulgasari is one- real, and two- a Korean hero. This will never be cleared up as he's too nervous challenge him on it.

Make sure to give tigers proper enrichment. A Pulgasari to chew on is sufficient.

I hate when people say Pulgasari is a Gojira ripoff because 1) there was a South Korean Pulgasari movie first and even if it wasn't lost I bet you wouldn't hear that about it as often, and 2) PULGASARI IS A KOREAN MYTH. It's like saying every vampire movie is a ripoff of Dracula or every ghost movie is a ripoff of Ju-on. There *are* ripoffs of Ju-on and Dracula, but those are different than ghost and vampire movies. Pulgasari is a kaiju movie but NOT a Gojira ripoff. Pulgasari doesn't have any similarities with Gojira except for being a giant lizard (and even then Pulgasari is a little more than that, he's closer to chimera/golem mix). Different mechanics, different themes.
I genuinely do think there's a deeper level to it in the way America is constantly trying to delegitimize the DPRK. The way they make sure to mention that 'the DPRK industrialized fast, using the factories the Japanese built' (not mentioning that they were destroyed when Japan left Korea and the Koreans had to rebuild

them all), or try to force the rumour that Soviets came up with the DPRK flag design (no proof), or act like the DPRK using English words or Western instruments is some sort of cultural victory and Korean culture can't 'keep up' with the West (ignoring how South Korea's music scene is *much* more Westernized), or say Communism is an 'imported ideology,' like it's solely a European or Soviet notion instead of something working people all over the world have taken and adapted to their own circumstances, and when Socialist polices were actively preferred by almost 80% of Koreans just after Liberation, and when the DPRK had their own distinct way of doing things even when under the trusteeship, AND like capitalism is just a natural law of the world that magically appeared in Korea alongside Christianity. If we want to talk about imported ideologies... They try to lay every single aspect of the DPRK's culture on the Soviet Union or Japan or even somehow America to portray them as this mechanical thing that isn't Korean instead of a system of governance with huge mass participation that was fought for for over twenty years and built over decades *by* Koreans. So it seems especially sinister to me when they say Pulgasari is a Gojira (Japanese, you know, *former colonizer of Korea*) ripoff when it is a genuine creature from Korean myth. Like in trying to delegitimize the DPRK, they're delegitimizing Korean culture in general.

This is all to say STOP slandering the DPRK and START questioning why so many countries have stories of giant lizard-like creatures.

Also an extra Hwang because I changed his expression but thought he looked cute with the original.

I think Pulgasari and Gojira get together to have tea and eat people.

Performance Of A Lifetime (One-shot)

[image] [image] [image]

WARNING: This is about China's backstory. It confirms something about who he is. I know the element of mystery is a big part of his character so I said I would put a notice in front of this chapter. If you want to keep the mystery alive, feel free to not read it. Thank you!

1916

China languished at the head of a glossy table laden with expensive dishes, idly watching the newest 'entertainment' one of his many suck-ups was attempting to ply him with.

The women danced around the tiled room, all lithe and laden with pearls and silks, the feathers on their hats bobbing as the dancers wrapped their arms around each other, kicking their slender legs out from under the hem of short slips.

It lacked all the subtlety and grace of ancient court dances, replacing the inherent beauty of a woman engaging in a craft she loved with boisterous Western moves and the taboo flash of undergarments every time a leg raised too high. In the corner, the record spun round and round, filling the room with the quick sound of foreign strings and jaunty percussion.

'He couldn't even be bothered to get live musicians.'

China side-eyed his host to his right without giving away that he was. Despite the buffet of flesh and actual meat before him, the man's eyes were fixed on the Countryhuman, anxious to please, begging for some scrap of favour.

He was one of those that had served under Qing, and had worked his way back up to the top again. For a supposed 'revolution,' many

of the old chairs seated familiar hindquarters. It was never that way in the theatre, though China had learned long ago that the stage reflected what people wanted to see, not necessarily what was real.

Which people? Did the theatre-goers with their fine clothes and bulging wallets truly want to witness stories of uprisings and rule-breaking?

And what did *this* man want to see? China's eyes glazed with lust as he observed the dancing girls, hoping that by the next morning he would be so heady with alcohol, rich meats, and sex that the official would take on a permanently rosy glow in his memories?

Observing his pinched lips and pencil-thin brows as the man watched him like a hawk, China would say that was it. Just another courtier begging for his favour, so used to grovelling on his knees for 'god' to toss him another scrap.

How freeing to be out from under the censors, allowed to throw women directly at his country without much maneuvering and no repercussions. Prostitution wasn't entirely legal, of course. But that never seemed to mean much in the halls of power. The men had the money to spend, and there were women to buy.

And what about the women? Was it freeing for them?

China examined their bright, red-painted smiles and powdered eyes as they moved in rhythm, and found that the answer was, as usual, no.

"A refill, sir?"

China looked down, finding a girl at his side, quickly identifying her as a brothel attendant by her crimped hair and loose changshan.

Since she wasn't one of his host's houseservants, he said, "If you'd please," holding his cup to her, out of view of the man to his right.

The girl's brows furrowed as she looked at his still-full glass of rice wine, and China subtly put a finger to his lips, gesturing for her to pour.

She pretended to, with an exaggerated motion that amused the Countryhuman. Children were always so earnest with their acting, and even if it was never convincing, there was a sincerity to it he found endearing.

The girl flinched as their host barked for her to refill his own glass, scurrying over.

'Sincerity.' Something none of the simpering sycophants around China had.

His host lifted his newly filled glass to him, and he lifted his back, smiling as he raised it to his lips to take another fake sip.

Ah, but he was one, too, wasn't he? Just another actor in this room full of them.

His eyes slid away as his host chattered on about something he would file away, but held little interest in, over the burgeoning plates and long carved table, lingering on the glistening glass beads dripping from the chandelier, until they landed on a girl in the corner.

She was young, maybe ten or so, dressed in a slim-flitting black qipao that made it clear she was one of the prostitutes, not an attendant, and she made China sit up straighter.

She had an easel in front of her, like several of the other girls, painting the room from different angles to practice their arts, and likely to try and sell China or his host a portrait of themselves. But this one's face was different than the others, her brown eyes narrowed in concentration, and her tongue poking out from the corner of her lips in a decidedly unseductive fashion, even if one was inclined to girls her age.

China couldn't see what she was painting, but he watched her expression intently as she studiously dipped her brush in ink and swirled it across the canvas.

He'd completely stopped paying attention to the dancing women, and his host noticed, following his gaze.

“She’s a pretty little thing, isn’t she?” the man asked.

China made a noncommittal hum. He’d personally never been able to associate any sort of attraction with children, and was decidedly disgusted by those that did.

Still, when his host said, “I could pay for you to spend the night with her. As a gift,” China smiled and answered, “I’d like that.”

Disdain flickered in the depths of his host’s eyes. That alone could have curried favour with the Countryhuman, but alas, the fact that he made no protests and simply waved the prostitutes’ handler over negated it.

China spent the rest of the meal like he’d spent the first half- sneaking food into his huge sleeves not because he needed to, but because he could- but now enamoured with watching the girl at work.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the night, one of the older prostitutes approached her, bending to whisper in her ear.

Her face went white under the powder that already caked it, her eyes darting to China. He smiled, watching her features fill with fear before her senior hustled her off to get her ready.

China drained his only glass of alcohol that night and got up while his host was mid-sentence, going to examine what the girl had been working on.

She hadn’t been capturing him or his host, or the lively dancing girls. Her focus had been the chandelier. It filled the paper, and though she’d only been working with an inkbush and limited inks, she’d done a resourceful job of capturing the way the light glinted off the hanging beads, something China himself had been admiring.

“She has potential,” he appraised as his host trotted over, irritated at being ignored, but pretending he wasn’t.

“I could buy that for you, if Your- Ahem. If Mister China wishes it.”

China smiled as the man took his bait. “I would be deeply appreciative.”

Disgust flickered in the human’s eyes again. Aiya, he probably thought his Countryhuman was a degenerate pervert. And more annoyingly, the average age of the women thrown at China was likely going to be halved for the next while, just like the last time he’d done this.

*‘You take interest in **one** Korean woman, and people assume you have a thing for foreigners.’*

Korean was fine, since he could speak it. But what was he supposed to do with a Japanese woman? He could understand her, but he couldn’t ask her what he wanted to.

He could now that he'd learned the language. But he still didn’t like the Japanese.

Hm. Maybe next time he would heavily hint that he wanted an older woman. Or pretend to mix up a head of household staff for a prostitute. It would be amusing to see his next host scramble to find the handful of wrinkly old women of the night inhabiting Beijing. Prostitution wasn’t exactly a profession you grew old in, from what China had heard.

At the end of the night, he bid his host a polite farewell, thanking him for his generosity and heavily implying he’d earned his favour.

He hadn't. China didn't have much but his favour to give, and he guarded it zealously. Not one single person in his government had managed to gain it.

But the man would see some gains for his efforts. He had to if China wanted to keep leaving his tower to attend banquets. It was all just part of the act.

The prostitutes filed out to be shuttled back to their brothel, except for whichever woman had been chosen by his host. China looked over his shoulder, pleased to see it was the dancer he’d guessed would be picked at the beginning of the evening. When the

man hadn't been watching his Countryhuman, he'd been eyeing her up.

'Hopefully his wife doesn't mind.' She wouldn't. Or if she did, she would say nothing. Concubinage. Another thing the 'revolution' had failed to disperse.

China's car was waiting in the courtyard, along with his pick of the litter. She stood next to the low, open-top vehicle, a shawl drawn over her qipao. She looked very small standing next to his driver.

China didn't address her, since a prostitute should be beneath him, especially one of her age.

'Confucius is dead, long live Confucius.'

"Home," he said simply to his driver, opening the door before the man could get it for him, holding it for the little girl.

Uneasily, she climbed in, and China shut the door behind her, smiling at his driver as he glided to the other side, waiting patiently until the man had to come open the door for him before returning to the driver's side. The Countryhuman slipped into the back with the girl.

"Have you ever been in a car before tonight?" he asked idly.

She hesitated, then said, "No, sir." Her voice was aiming for the smooth tone her more experienced seniors always used to lie about their feelings to him, but the cracks showed.

Hm. If he was offered more children, he might get more honest answers. Though any he got would also come through a lens of naïveté and undeveloped worldviews.

Regardless, he'd set his heart on grandmothers. He wanted to see if someone could look him dead in the eyes and say, 'Pretty old thing, isn't she?' without wavering.

"You're in luck," China said to the girl. "This is a Studebaker, made this year. Only the best for China's Countryhuman. Isn't that

right, Mr. Li?”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, pulling out of the courtyard of the large manor.

“And the best is always American, isn’t it, Mr. Li?”

American cars, American music, American dances. American ‘democracy.’ Swap it with ‘British’ and not much had changed over near a century. In plays, the revolution was always the end of the whatever inciting incident had spurred the protagonist to action. As the streets of Beijing rolled by them, China didn’t see much changed.

Li Penyuan hated the Americans and the decadent West. But still, as his knuckles tightened on the wheel, he said, “Yes, sir.”

China smiled at the act, turning his eyes out the open roof.

The sun was down, and the late fall sank chill claws into the flea-ridden hide of Beijing, making the girl shiver. The Countryhuman also wanted to shiver, but he didn’t twitch, aloof in his double-breasted suit.

The streets of their ostensible capital were narrow, but not so dirty near the heart. The manors were large and their courtyards clean, and the homes beyond them were dirty and cramped, rife with disease and starvation. The theatres were full of actors and so was the National Assembly.

China could have told Sun Yatsen that Yuan Shikai would betray him. It was how stories always went. If it didn’t end with the revolution, it ended in betrayal. He simply hadn’t felt the need to.

The revolution came, the government splintered, backs were stabbed and politicians fled. China fell apart and was passed into hands that wanted to place a crown on his brow again, but lacked the passion to, then back into ones that were fine with expensive silks, and nothing ever changed.

He smiled out at the lamplight glowing in windows, inhaling the scent of steamed bread and skewers of stringy mystery meat that

smelled far richer than the feast placed before him earlier.

Out there in the dark. *That* was where things changed.

Alas, China was back to his tower.

They pulled up in front of the hutong, and he made the driver get the door for him again, then went to hold the girl's for her. She shook as her slippered feet touched the tiles, and he was pleased to note again that they hadn't been bound.

His driver opened the gate as well, exposing the festoon gate beyond the entry courtyard. China breezed in, not bidding him goodnight. The man had no intention of dropping his act. He bored him like most others.

The courtyard was brightly lit, fires burning in the red paper lanterns, casting scarlet shadows on his many-coloured flag. As they passed beneath the gated arch, the little girl's face was solemn under their bloody glow. China wondered if she was imagining being swallowed whole by a dragon. It was what he usually did.

The tile-roofed walls rose up around them, and the gate slammed shut, cutting off his last glimpse of the world beyond the tower.

He could always escape. Even with the increased security the fracturing of their country brought, China had mastered the art of slipping away, out into the streets.

Usually he only went to watch the plays down by the river, put on by the poor and destitute in hopes of winning a few coins. Rough and unprofessional, they were just as engaging as the affairs he watched in the theatre, trained voices and many faces and enough silks to clothe an army, or a village.

But he knew those he talked to were put in danger by it. And in the end, there wasn't truly anywhere he could go. No matter where he went, China wouldn't change.

The girl padded behind him, the evening air thick with the smell of her fear. China could hear her teeth chattering as he led her through the festoon gate, opened by his 'bodyguards.'

The main courtyard glowed with more red lanterns, the trees and hall festooned in a thousand and one red string fortune charms obsessively tied by China in his boredom. The breeze made them sway, bells chiming and beads clacking.

Lights were on in only one building, the main hall at the back. So many buildings in his hutong, but only one resident. The servants were gone, as they always were when he returned now. China had asked them too many questions.

His shoes made no sound on the courtyard tiles. The girl's made soft scuffs as they mounted the stairs to the hall.

China opened the door for her, and she gazed at the rectangle of yellow light, her eyes old beyond her age. Then she carefully stepped over the threshold.

The Countryhuman closed the door, the good luck charms he'd tied to it swaying silently.

Excited to finally have the girl alone, China ordered, "Stay here," then went to his bedroom off to the side, emerging a few seconds later in a short, dark blue changshan and pants, Western-style suit shucked off.

'Much better.'

The girl flinched as he emerged, likely expecting him to be naked, then blinked in surprise as he ignored her and slid out the back door, heading to one of the rooms in the back building, plunging into the dark and rifling around until he came out with what he wanted. She still looked surprised as he darted back in, looking around before thunking the easel he'd brought down in front of the mother-of-pearl sofa-chair, placing the items he'd had balanced in his other arm on it.

A yelp escaped the girl as China took her by the thin wrist, pulling her over to the sofa-chair, making her sit.

He should probably start with a normal question.

"How do they call you?"

“Um.” The girl’s throat bobbed. “Zhao…” Her deep brown eyes, the colour of red beans, flickered. “Zhao Jingjing.”

It sounded like she was trying to sound seductive. But her voice was so squeaky China was seized by momentary cuteness aggression.

“I liked your painting, meimei,” China said, pulling the folded paper he’d swapped into his changshan from his sleeve.

Jingjing’s eyes had widened at being addressed so casually by her Countryhuman, and bulged out of her head as she saw the inkbrush chandelier she’d been working on.

China smiled at her. “Paint me another.”

The girl looked down at the collection of brushes and paints he’d placed next to her- an ink stone, acrylics, and oil paints.

“W-What do you want me to paint, Mister?” she asked nervously.

“Whatever you like,” China said, then took a seat on a cushion at the table in the center of the room, folding his long legs under himself, and settling in to watch her.

The girl examined the tools he’d offered her, and he felt internal satisfaction as she went with the regular pointed paintbrush. Her strokes on the chandelier had been too light, as if forcing herself to keep a delicate touch, some mental scolding ringing through her mind. She wanted to apply pressure and make a mark, so it didn’t surprise him when she avoided the water-based paints, examining the colourful oils instead.

Promising, though as she readied her materials and started to sketch with thinned-out paints, she did what everyone else did.

She snuck looks at him, nervously asking for his approval with every brush stroke, her hand shaking slightly, even as her painted rosebud lips tried to stay curved up.

After a few more minutes of this, China stood, making her flinch. She quailed as he came to peer at her sketch.

As he'd expected, she was drawing him curled up at the table, reclining in a way he hadn't been. Her anatomy was impressive, but he could already tell it lacked the artistry of the piece on the table. It didn't *sing* the way the chandelier did.

China clicked his tongue. "Your nerves are affecting your work, meimei."

Ah. He should probably do something about that. He'd gotten too eager.

"I'm not going to touch you," he informed her. "I only brought you here to paint for me."

The girl blinked, her small, thick brows pulling in. "You're not… going to use me?"

Inwardly, he scrunched his face at the words. Outwardly, he smiled and said, "Well, one could still consider this using you. But I'm not going to sleep with you, no. So don't let your worry over that make your lines waver."

Not that straight lines were necessary for art. Some of China's favourite pieces were messy from how strongly the emotions that had gone into them had been in control of the artist's hand. He had a fragment of an old scroll he'd found while rooting around in places he shouldn't have been that had a woman painted on it in faded inks. Her line work had been so unsteady that it was clear her creator hadn't been a master of the craft, only a man that felt so deeply for her that he'd needed to capture how he felt on paper. China kept her in his bedroom, next to the window, as close to the world as he could get her.

But Jingjing's nervousness over him wasn't something that needed capturing. He was glad he'd interrupted her before she could decide on an expression to make up for him. He didn't feel like being met with his own mask tonight.

"And paint what *you* want to," he said to the girl. "Not what you think I want you to."

That was why not many of the women he was offered intrigued him. They were performing what they thought they should be. There was no passion in their dances or songs, or their art. Even if they did enjoy those things, they didn't enjoy being made to perform for he or his hosts. And the ones he pulled aside anyway refused to drop their masks.

Jingjing still looked a bit nervous, but after China returned to his cushion, the hand that lifted the brush was slightly steadier.

China sat with his legs crossed, hands on his thighs, and slender eyes fixed on the girl's face. At first she continued to sneak looks at him, disconcerted by his staring. But as she worked, she fell into her rhythm, and eventually her attention was solely on her canvas.

China smiled as her tongue poked out the side of her mouth.

He let her paint for around two hours, only moving to slide some of the food he'd filched from the banquet out of his sleeve and onto the side table for her. Her eyes widened at the array of items, and for a bit, she painted with one hand and ate red bean-filled buns and succulent fruits with the other.

China hadn't gotten too wild tonight. His most ambitious capture to date was an entire bowl of noodles, tableware and all. Getting that out the door without spilling had been tricky, even for him.

That had unfortunately ended in a servant getting beaten for theft. He stuck to things that were meant to disappear now.

After enough time had passed, he got up again, and came to sit next to Jingjing on the firm cushion of the sofa-chair. The girl barely noticed as he leaned over her shoulder, still absorbed in her art. Her tongue had worn a hole in her face powder, exposing brown skin.

She had painted a small village house with white stone walls and a tile roof. Wood was piled along the weathered wall on one side of the door, flanked on the other by a clothesline made of three bamboo poles lashed together, one single threadbare grey changshan hung over it. The walls of the cramped courtyard that

surrounded it were low and worn, and a handcart whose tire had a snapped wooden spoke sat in the corner.

Despite its run-down appearance, China could tell it was lived in. The changshan had been lovingly mended with patches of almost the exact same shade of fabric, forgotten, not abandoned. The woodpile was low from being used to stoke the fire glowing through the open entryway, and despite the handcart's broken spoke, it was leaned carefully against the wall. It had been damaged by use, not neglect, and was waiting to be fixed. The plaque next to the doorway was well-cared for, and read *'Zhao.'*

The colours were all muted and soft, shades of blues and purples, conveying the sense of a residence at twilight, except for the fire, which was a welcome warmth that drew the eye. It looked inviting and familiar, a place to come home to.

China felt his heart clench, and flooded with elation.

"And where is this, meimei?" he asked, eyes tracing the lines of the home.

She startled like she'd forgotten he was there, but didn't miss a stroke.

"M-My village," she said, the brush dipping. "It was my house. Where me and my family lived."

Her gaze followed the architecture with even more care than China's, ending on the glow of the fire.

"And what brings you here now?" he asked, tipping his head.

She hung her head. "My mama got sick. Papa couldn't afford to keep us. So he sold us to Madame Liu."

"Does that happen often?" China asked idly. "Women being sold?"

Jingjing hesitated. He didn't push her, waiting for an answer.

Usually it was 'I don't know.' But the girl bit her lip, and said, "I

think so. But some of the older women told me they chose to go there. They sold themselves to keep their families out of debt, or because they had nowhere else to go."

"And why wouldn't they have anywhere else to go?"

The child thought about it. "I think… it's hard to get a job as a girl. Or go to school. My parents never had enough for me. And if you get mad at your husband and don't want to live with him anymore, it's hard to go home."

Not exactly the scathing societal critique he'd get from an adult. But a willingness to talk at least.

"But the majority are sold?" he prodded.

She bobbed her head. "I think so. Huahua-jiejie said her mom sold her so she could go burn the white lotus." After a long moment of consideration, she added, "I don't know what that means, though."

With none of the darkness he felt at her words, China said, "Opium, meimei. Stay away."

"Is that what Madam Liu smokes in her long stick?"

"Likely." China had an interest in the topic of drugs, but knew he wouldn't get much from a girl that didn't know what an opium den was, so he veered away. "Would you say the women that chose to join the brothel really had a choice?"

Jingjing tipped her head in confusion. "They chose to go."

"But the only alternatives are poverty or being sold off by others," China countered. "What if I held a knife to your throat and told you to paint another picture or I'd kill you? Would that feel like a choice?"

Jingjing swallowed nervously. "N-No."

"Mm." China considered this, then asked, "Do you enjoy working in a brothel?"

She averted her eyes. “I… haven’t actually taken a customer yet. This is my debut.”

He’d suspected as much. Between the work that was done to censor the information he received and a lack of information on that topic in his common sense, he wasn't exactly an expert on the workings of brothels. But it made sense to wait until a girl flowered to market her. She’d likely spend her early years assisting her seniors and learning from them.

And how did that feel, he wondered? To take care of an innocent little sister, knowing you were grooming her to take your place on her back? He wondered how many women regretted it, and to how many it was just a fact of their profession.

Questions he couldn’t ask Jingjing, obviously.

So he asked one he could. “How old are you?”

“Eleven.” She flashed her fingers at him.

“Do you think that’s old enough to be a prostitute?”

The girl hesitated. “..Some of the other girls started even younger.”

China kept his voice light. “And do you think they should have?”

She looked down at her clasped hands.

“You can tell me, meimei. I’m not looking for a certain answer.”

China had his own opinions, ones he’d been relatively formed with, but had been rejected by the men around him during his early years. By now he’d refined some of them and gained more over the years during the interactions he’d managed to have with the women that worked the brothels, just as he’d done with actors and his servants, before they’d been segregated from him. But he'd like more from the people he was forming opinions on, which was exceedingly difficult.

And entertaining. It did make working an answer out of them more satisfying.

“I-Idon’tthinkso,” the girl rushed, squeezing her eyes shut like he might scold her.

China only hummed. “I see. Let’s go back to our other question then- do you enjoy your work? The kind you do now at least.”

“Everyone at the brothel is usually nice to me,” she said. “Even Madam Liu.”

That seemed to be the truth. Though the ‘even’ implied the madam was about as pleasant as a businesswoman could be.

But it was also an obvious dodge.

“What would you be if you weren’t a whore?” China asked, watching her flinch at the word. “An artist?” He tipped his head at her painting.

She ducked her head shyly. “…A doctor.”

“A doctor?” he echoed to prompt her.

“I want to make sure no one else dies like my mama.” She raised her head, and there was a spark in her eyes that made China’s pulse skip.

“How noble,” he murmured.

There were a few places training female doctors, he’d heard. All foreign-owned and dedicated to spreading Christianity. Healing a sickness and replacing it with a plague.

Regardless, the girl wouldn’t have the funds for any of them.

“And would you rather be a prostitute, meimei?” he asked. “Do you like this life?”

She hung her head, and he pressed the attack.

“I’ve delayed your debut tonight. But you’ll have to start soon.” He leaned forward slightly. “Will you enjoy it?”

“No!” the girl burst out, tears welling in her eyes. “No I won’t! All the older girls always talk about stuff and laugh like it’s funny, but it’s not! It’s scary! It’s really scary and I- I don’t wanna-“

China was rarely exposed to real grief, so he made sure to observe her facial expressions carefully as her brows scrunched in, her lips pulled down, and her eyes screwed up, fat tears pouring down her chubby cheeks, cutting tracks in the powder on them.

With a wail of anguish, the girl clutched at his changshan, burying her face in the soft fabric.

“I want my mommy and daddy!” she cried. “I wanna go home!”

China tipped his head at her. Then, testing her reaction, placed a hand on her shoulder. When she only clutched at him tighter, he slid his arms around her, crushing her to his chest.

She was very small and warm, and he decided that his opinion on this had solidified, and wouldn’t be swayed by any dissenting ones from others.

Liang Qichao, that old reformer, had said that China was inferior to the West in every way, except for in the defense of their people, which was the best in the world.

Yet how could letting children be sold like meat be defending them? It didn’t matter that there were some laws in place against it. When it was open knowledge that so many women were being bought and sold, when government officials could visit them without scorn and offer them to their Countryhuman without second thought, when this girl wasn’t an aberration, but the norm, and when every single woman he’d asked before if they enjoyed selling themselves had said they did, and they were honoured to be here, with bright smiles and dead eyes, none of those laws mattered. They didn’t stop families from falling on hard times or give women another option. All they did was let lawmakers pretend they’d done something to solve the problem while they themselves fed it.

China’s children were commodities to foreign nations. Cheap

labour and sacrifices to the priests at the Western churches, virgin blood for foreign capital. But how could they expect any less when they were commodities to China, too, and their women along with them?

Another thing he wanted to change that wouldn't.

Jingjing eventually pulled back, rubbing her hands over her eyes, smudging the black powder around. China was reluctant to let her go. He'd never experienced a hug closer than watching one on stage before, and he had enjoyed it as much as he'd expected. But he let her lean away, folding his hands into his sleeves.

"I'm shorry," the girl sniffled. "I didn't mean to be dish-dishrespectful."

"It's alright, meimei," China said, watching as she wiped at her face, smearing her make-up even more, exposing tanned skin and softening the contours of her features further.

It made her look even younger. China had to keep his hands in his sleeves to avoid crushing her. Or possibly embarking on a revenge quest against her father.

He fantasized about that for a second before returning to the issue at hand.

"Meimei," he said seriously, unsmiling. "If I could buy you out, would you want that?"

Her eyes went wide with hope as she looked up at him. But then the light dimmed.

"You can't," she said, hanging her head again. "I have a death contract."

Some women actually paid brothels in order to work at them, giving a down payment to the owner in exchange for protection. They signed contracts that would keep them for a few years, which they could then renew or choose to leave. But the women who were sold had no choice.

And a death contract was exactly what it sounded like.

"It's too much money," Jingjing said miserably. "You'd have to pay for my room and board for the past three years, and all the future, um… 'potential revenue' Madam Liu would lose. And she says I have a lot of potential."

China had become skilled at keeping his emotions masked, but the surge of revulsion he felt at the idea that someone could look at this awkward duckling of a girl and feel desire instead of the overwhelming urge to pinch her cheeks was so strong that his eyebrow twitched.

'Ah.' That was a new emotion. Protectiveness. He turned the burning feeling over, examining its sharp edges, and decided it felt right. It settled comfortably into his breastbone like an emotion he *should* feel.

"And if I could pay it?" he asked.

He had a very large sum of money, and the Beiyang government tended to indulge his whims, Yuan Shikai especially had. 'Reviving the monarchy' evidently included treating China like a god again. Though more like one whose shrine you left offerings at instead of one you worshiped. He'd enjoyed seeing how much he could milk the deeply corrupt officials for. In the span of two years, he had acquired three cars, an increasingly eccentric array of food items, including ostrich, as many red strings as he could get, and every sort of art supply possible to cram his rooms with. There was also a mummified head from Yunnan that he liked to keep on his table when he had company he preferred not to visit again.

The trio that was in charge now (for a short time, China would predict) was anti-monarchy. But they'd more or less kept up the supply of offerings, likely to keep the real Chinese Countryhuman on their side. As recognition for not calling him 'Your Heavenly Majesty' or 'Dragon of Heaven' and actually calling him by his name, China had scaled back his requests to just art supplies. And any information they could get him on the history of headhunting, which was so far 'none.'

And unfortunately he wasn't allowed to meet Yunnan, or any of his provinces, even Hebei. 'Assassination attempts,' you understand.

He wasn't sure if the government would indulge his request for a child concubine. But if they weren't going to listen to the opinions he'd given them after the formation of the Republic and insist on keeping the practice, he might as well use it for good.

Jingjing's hopeful look died quicker this time. "It's not just me," she said quietly. "My sister is there, too."

"Would you leave her behind, if you could?" China asked curiously.

She shook her head immediately. "She's my little sister. She's only seven. It's my job to look out for her."

From her mentions of 'us,' China had guessed she'd had a sister. He'd just wanted to see if she would lie and pretend she didn't to be saved.

"That's very mature of you." Too mature for such a young girl.

"But I am afraid that while my requests for one girl might be indulged, I doubt two would be."

Jingjing tilted her head. "Why do you have to request stuff? Can't a Countryhuman get anything he wants?"

China laughed softly. "Perhaps. But right now, if China wants something, it has to be given to him. Have you ever read Western fairytales, meimei?"

He didn't expect a yes, and didn't get one.

"They have a certain trope that involves a princess being stuck in a tower, waiting for a hero to set her free," he explained. "You'll find the motif in many of our fairytales as well- a princess or noblewoman being locked up in her suites by her father. Though I prefer the tower imagery. More dramatic that way."

China had read enough stories and watched enough plays that he

understood the symbolism behind a woman being trapped in an inescapable prison, usually by a man. Though Western tales usually tried to pretty it up by letting the right man save her. Perhaps China preferred those endings, but his own were far more realistic- the woman usually died. There was no right man, only the prison. Or death to set her free.

For obvious reasons, China was choosing to favour Western tales for the only time in his life.

"I'm the princess, meimei."

Perhaps he shouldn't compare himself to that. But it was the closest equivalent. Someone important and royal, but with no real power, beholden to the whims of her King-father or Emperor. Though China's King-father was a selection of men that held delusions of grandeur and couldn't agree on what colour the sky above them was if they had swords to their necks.

Jingjing blinked. "And you're waiting for your hero to come save you?"

China drew his legs up, sitting cross-legged again. "That's right. Someone to slay the dragon- Western dragons are evil, not like our lóng- and help me down from my tower."

He suspected he would be waiting awhile. In the meantime, he'd keep forming his mental image of what that hero should offer to coax him down.

"I hope your hero comes." Jingjing pulled her legs up to her chest, still too much a child to realize it made her qipao ruck up. "I wish…"

She didn't finish the sentence. China didn't need his years of reading people to know what she'd been going to say.

He didn't fix her dress. Let her keep that unawareness of shame a little longer. But he carefully reached out an arm and touched her shoulder, and when she leaned her head against his side, he started to card his fingers through her hair, brushing the curls out until it

was an ugly little duck-cut again.

He had more questions he'd like to ask, but…

“Do you want to see a magic trick, meimei?”

Jingjing sniffed, raising her head. “What kind of-?”

She cut herself off, stunned, as he pulled a trumpet creeper out of his sleeve with a flourish.

“How did you do that?” The girl grabbed at his hand like he’d made the red flower sprout from the black palm.

China closed his fingers around the bloom, and when he opened them, it was gone. “Magic.”

Jingjing’s mouth fell open, her eyes lighting up, despite the tears still puddled in the corners. Her reaction to the trick he'd been working on for years was far more satisfying than all the trinkets he’d stolen with it.

He smiled. "Want to see some more?”

The girl nodded vigorously, and he delved into his experience with sleight of hand to craft a few more tricks to entertain a child, making a ‘Yuan’ Shikai coin appear in her pocket, guessing the outcome of a set of dice correctly every time, and pulling an increasing assortment of strange objects out of his sleeves, glad he’d left them in the changshan when he'd changed for the banquet.

Each one delighted her more than the last, her melancholy melting away as she bounced in place, clapping her hands and squealing with joy.

China entertained her into the night, until her eyelids started drooping, and she began to yawn. He was just surprised it had taken her so long. Her anxiety must have been a good insomniac.

When she eventually slumped over on his lap, China let her rest there for a few minutes before he carefully slid her off, picking her legs up and arranging her on the sofa-chair. By the time he was

back with a blanket, she'd curled up in a tiny ball. He smoothed her qipao down, softly draped the cover over her, then sat on the floor, leaning back against the chair as he admired her painting, and mused.

When early morning light had started to creep in the windows, he shook her gently, though he loathed to disturb the look on her face. She pouted in her sleep, the puffed out lips and cheeks of a vexed child instead of the frown of a woman with no control over her own life.

As her eyes opened, she murmured, "Mama?"

Heart squeezing, China smiled and said, "Just Big Brother, I'm afraid."

He could see the weariness descend on her again as she remembered that her sad little life wasn't all just an unpleasant dream.

"Oh."

"I'm sure your senior will be here soon to pick you up," he said, remaining light. "I made some tea for you while we wait."

They drank the honey-ginger tea, the girl muzzily rubbing her eyes. Her duck-cut stuck up on one side, making China reach across the table to try and smooth it down, though the results were less than satisfactory.

Too bad he didn't have any hair oils. He didn't exactly need those, for obvious reasons. He did have a wooden comb he'd asked for (just to see if anyone would challenge him on needing one- they hadn't), but he supposed it would be a little suspicious to return her *too* well-cared for.

Jingjing swirled her tea in her cup, watching the amber liquid swirl. "Mister China?"

"You can call me 'gege.'"

She bit her lip, clearly intimidated by the idea. It would be normal

for a child to call a twenty-sixish-year old man that, but undoubtedly no China in their country's history had ever been called 'Big Brother' by a lowly human.

"We can work on it," China said, mildly disappointed. "But what was your question, meimei?"

She swirled her tea more, then set it down. "Why didn't you have… sleep with me?"

His chest tightened a little at the realization that she'd halfway been expecting to wake up violated.

He decided not to lie to her (rare). "Frankly, meimei, those who lie with children disgust me. Or those who exchange money for flesh at all."

"Oh," she said quietly, picking her tea back up.

Trying to lift her spirits, China declared, "And even if that wasn't true, I'm a romantic." He clasped his hands under his chin, batting his eyelashes up at the ceiling with a dreamy sigh. "Ideally when my hero comes, she'll be a gorgeous woman with a heart of gold that lifts me down from my tower, then spirits me away to be wed."

He won a little giggle at that, though she sobered again after.

"They're going to… check to see if I'm broken in."

China's hand remained steady on his cup as he sipped his tea. "Tell them I'm impotent, and you had to find other ways to satisfy me. And while we're at it, take this."

He handed her a letter he'd penned while she slept. She took it, frowning.

"You can't read, can you?"

"No," she admitted.

China tipped his head. "That's common, is it?"

She seemed to know this answer decisively, nodding. “My mama and papa couldn’t read either. Madam Liu’s the only person I’ve ever met who can read *and* write. And you, I guess.”

Another thing unchanged. He’d ask more about it next time.

“It says I’m enamored with you, and intend to pay a large sum of money to be the one to take your virginity,” he explained, draining the last of his tea. "It should hold your ‘debut’ off for a little longer. Though don’t expect it to work for good. I expect your pimp will hedge her bets that I have no idea how to tell if a girl is a virgin or not.”

He did, actually. Sex scrolls were one of the few things his censors let him get his hands on easily. He was full of useless knowledge and very little substance. If it wasn’t for his common sense, he expected he’d know about as much as Jingjing. Less, likely.

‘Knowledge that doesn’t interfere with the status quo.’ That’s what China was allowed.

Jingjing clutched the letter to her chest, looking uncomfortable, but hopeful. “Does that mean…?”

“Gege might not be granted enough money to buy you and your sister out, but I’m sure I won’t be begrudged a night or two of pleasure.” China smiled. “The pleasure of watching you paint more. If you’d like that.”

The girl bobbed her head vigorously, though he could tell she still had questions on her mind, like him.

A bell rang outside, and China rose. “I believe that’s for you.”

Jingjing’s hands clutched at the hem of her qipao, but she slowly stood, carefully folding the letter he’d given her like it was a priceless scroll. The Countryhuman fetched her black shawl, wrapping it snugly around her shoulders.

“Mister China?” she asked as they stood at the door to the courtyard. “Can I ask you something else?”

He gave her permission, and she said, “If people who sleep with children or… or whores at all disgust you, then… doesn’t it bother you that all my seniors and those guys last night will think you did it with me?”

China smiled. “Meimei, the only reason you should ever care what someone thinks of you is if it gets you something from them. I happen to benefit from the fine men of our government thinking I’m a degenerate sleaze. The ones I want to think that will, and the ones I don’t want to think that won’t.”

The words went above her furrowed brows, but he hoped she’d at least remember the first part when his letter stopped protecting her.

He paused, then added, “And you should care about what a friend thinks, too.”

She ducked her head, and he stroked the side of it, smiling as she gasped when he pulled the trumpet creeper out from behind her ear.

China tucked the flower into her hair, then opened the door. She clutched at his sleeve. He waited, curious to see what she would say.

But then she gradually pried her fingers free, and stepped out into the chilly morning.

A degenerate sleaze wouldn’t escort her to the gate, so China remained in his doorway, watching the girl’s figure, so tiny in the cold grey morning, make her way towards the gate, the little red flower bobbing above her ear.

That protective feeling lodged in his chest again, the urge to run after her, to scoop her up and refuse to let them take her.

But it wasn’t like that would save her. Change was the only thing that would.

As the gate opened, and Jingjing stepped out with one last backward glance, her Countryhuman turned and went inside.

China met Zhao Jingjing several more times in the months after that. He watched her finish her painting and start a new one, started to teach her how to read and write, and asked her as many questions as he could.

"Where did you learn how to paint?" "My senior, Minglan-jiejie."

"What work did your parents do?" "They were farmers on someone else's farm."

"Did you always have enough to eat?" "No. We went hungry sometimes."

"Do you think it's fair that they picked all those crops just to starve?" "I don't know. …No."

"Why do you think the gentry enjoy stories about peasants rising up and vanquishing evil when it goes against what they believe in real life?" "Um, I don't know. I've never seen a play before."

She didn't have the experience he needed for some of the answers, but he appreciated the sincerity with which she gave them.

He sent her back to the brothel with questions to ask her fellow prostitutes every time. Their answers weren't much good when a senior might tell a younger girl that she didn't have anything to worry about, and he couldn't see them to tell if they were lying, but Jingjing seemed to enjoy playing the part of a 'spy,' so he always came up with more.

Her stories about life in the brothel were more revealing. The parties her seniors spoke of, hosted by men China knew, bawdy tales whose meaning eluded the girl, but not the Countryhuman, the women that she heard crying late at night.

One had fallen in love with one of her clients, but when he lacked the funds to buy her out, she had taken her own life. A week later, he was back paying for a new girl, and by Jingjing's casual explanation, none of the other women seemed shocked.

That said everything China needed to hear. He had enough information to have decided his course on the issue (and to decide that he had been right, thank you very much), but there was no such thing as too much intel.

He got information on the Jiliang as well. The office had been formed in Beijing by Qing officials in the final years, a place where women who shouldn't be prostitutes- those forced into it, tricked by the advertised 'English classes' or 'book clubs,' or children- would be taken in, taught how to read and other life skills, and reformed. Ostensibly, only women that truly 'wanted' to sell themselves would be left.

The office still existed in some capacity, in the way it always had. It was his officials' excuse when he had brought up his initial ideas for dealing with prostitution- abolishing it would do no good, and they already had the reforming office.

The office Jingjing told him most women were too scared to go to, since it put the women out for marriage. She only knew about it because a senior had warned her away. One of their former coworkers had gone, been locked up until she was chosen by a man, and beaten to death by him after he 'freed' her. Better to be abused by many under the care of your sisters than to be abused by one, where out of sight was out of mind.

China had his suspicions already, but this only confirmed it- the Jiliang was just another brothel, selling women for marriage instead of just sex. They may teach them how to read and write, but nothing else that wouldn't serve as a skill for a wife.

A man could be anything. But it seemed once a Chinese woman stopped being a daughter, she could only be a wife or a whore. Anything else required money, education, and support that was exceedingly rare.

One day, seven months after they'd first met, the girl arrived at his front gate, and he could already tell by her face that their bluff was over.

He led her into his main hall, and she collapsed into his arms,

sobbing her little heart out as he rocked her, and ran his fingers over the blade of another new emotion- anger. Not that of witnessing injustice on the stage or of having to listen to the members of his government suck up to him while denying any of the words he said that held substance, but *rage.*

It thrummed in his blood and made his temples pound, more visceral than any actor had ever sounded as they screamed out on stage.

China hid it well, as he hid everything, holding the girl and speaking calmly, like it wasn't a big deal, like nothing had changed. Because it hadn't.

"I feel icky," the girl rasped into his changshan.

"You're not icky, meimei," China murmured, petting her fluffy black hair. "Whoever did it is. You're the exact same to gege. That's all that matters."

The rumour came to him a few weeks later. That an elected official's recent debt was because he'd heard about his Countryhuman's obsession with a young prostitute, and spent an obscene amount of money to steal her virginity from him.

China smiled and laughed, and said if that was true, then it was fair game, and half a year later he killed someone for the first time. Arsenic made a lovely shade of green when mixed with paints, and he'd ordered it too long ago for anyone to connect it to him. Everyone simply assumed it was an assassination enacted by the Zhili clique, and for the next few months, a string of deaths erupted in the government amongst both them and the Anhui clique, while China observed with amusement.

Politics could be just as entertaining as any play. As the country cracked and fell apart over the next two years, China poked and prodded, noting actions and reactions, honing his ability to predict people and events that he'd picked up from watching hours of plays and reading hundreds of books.

The trio fell apart as he'd expected, Puyi had the world's shortest

second reign as emperor, lasting a whole twelve days, Sun Yatsen went south to Guangzhou, establishing a new government that divided the country even further, China gave lazy assent to war with the Central Powers in Europe, knowing it would be declared either way, Duan took out loans from Japan and raised an army to crush his enemies, and like the stalemate in the war between the north and south, nothing ever changed.

And in the shadows, China worked.

Zhao Jingjing wasn't enough. She'd given him a taste of what he needed to know, but he needed more, needed to know *all* of it. He stopped placing his concerns for endangering civilians ahead of his lust for understanding, because they were in danger anyways. From war, from famine, from destitution, from their country teetering on a knife's edge.

He snuck out whenever he could, visiting docks and warehouses and army recruitment centers and libraries, and sometimes brothels, asking questions and receiving answers, sometimes even honest ones. Even those that refused to remove their masks told him what he needed to know.

It was in the bent backs of the workers, the shrewd eyes of the intellectuals, the strained lines on the prostitutes' faces, and the maimed bodies of the soldiers returned from the war, now languishing in opium dens that China refused to enter. *'Change, change, change.'* The whole of China was crying for it.

But nothing did.

The war ended and the Anhui clique gave up Shandong to Japan, and that wasn't new either. It had been whored out to Germany before. China had been being carved up and butchered for a century, sold to foreign powers like cuts of meat. Japan had been salivating for him before either of their new personifications.

And one day, China descended from his tower to visit Beijing University, and found something he hadn't known he'd been looking for. Not his hero, but something else.

A muse.

He was browsing the shelves, keenly aware of his minders waiting at the door, examining suitably boring titles, when he saw him.

The young man, perhaps the same physical age as China, was slotting a book onto a shelf in the back. His suit was neat, suggesting an intellectual, and he did his task with a familiarity that implied he worked here.

But his eyes weren't those of a librarian. They burned with the same spark Jingjing's had as they were focused on her painting, the spark that had drawn the Countryhuman to her.

But this man's eyes were focused on China.

The Countryhuman smiled to himself, pretending he didn't see the observation, continuing his browsing, moving closer shelf by shelf, curious to see what his watcher would do.

He kept up his task, sorting books, pulling his handcart along with him. He knew China was watching.

They danced among the shelves for a few minutes, until they were towards the back, away from the tall, narrow windows and out of sight of any pesky witnesses.

China ran his fingers along old cracked spines, still pretending to ignore him. Did he have the courage to approach?

He did, setting down a volume and striding over, not humble or submissive in the slightest.

China turned his head. "Can I help you?"

The first words out of his mouth made the Countryhuman's pulse kick up.

"Our country needs to change."

"Oh?" he said casually, belying his pounding heart. "Is that so?"

"It is." The young man met his eyes with his own still burning. "There are too many injustices that run too deep, and no one is *doing* anything about them. Year by year, it only gets worse. Someone like you *needs* to see that. If we carry on like this, China- our nation of over five thousand years- will be no more. And it won't *deserve* to be."

China turned his full attention to him.

The man was handsome, with a square jaw, full lips, and wavy dark hair. The hands balled at his side were rougher than you would expect from a librarian. Someone who held an intellectual position, but didn't shy from hard work.

"And you think *you* know how to change us?"

The man said, "No. But I'm trying to figure it out. We all are. I'm not alone in my views. I'm coming to you on behalf of more people than you could ever know, and we *all* want change."

China tilted his head. "And what would you change?"

"Land ownership," he said immediately. "People are starving. Landlords buy up all the land and work their peasants to the bone, then take what should rightfully belong to the people who harvested it." He slammed a fist into his palm, speaking faster. "And arranged marriage. Young men and women are forced together with no say in the matter, and it does no good for any of them."

His calves twitched like he wanted to pace, but he remained standing. "Women need more choice in general. They make up half our population, but have no say in their futures. They aren't taught to read and write, no peasants are. How are they supposed to ever live fulfilling lives if they aren't given the *chance?"*

"And how would you fix that?" China asked eagerly. "How would you give them that chance?"

The man's jaw feathered. "I don't know. But I want to. It *has* to be fixable."

He was angry, and making no effort to hide it. But he was more

than that. Under his voice quivered excitement, both at being able to tell his Countryhuman his beliefs so directly, and at the idea of that change.

China took a step towards him. “Why do you think the gentry enjoy art about justice so much?” he asked. “Why do you think they flock to stories about peasants rising up against unjust landlords, and women breaking free from tradition to be with the man they love, when it goes against everything they stand for in real life?”

The man didn't question his sudden change of topic, and he didn’t hesitate. He answered right away, not in the manner of someone that hadn’t thought about his answer, but someone that had thought on it deeply.

“Because they want to pretend those stories only exist in fiction,” he said decisively. “They want to pretend that the masses are only capable of love and sorrow and rage, that they’re only *human* when they’re part of a story put on for them, and that the stage is the only place they’ll ever rebel.”

China’s heart sang at the words, echoing his own musings as the ecstasy of a performance died down, and he was left alone with people praising actions they would call barbaric and wrong if they had taken place off the stage.

“And you need to remember,” the man continued, his voice picking up speed. “The gentry aren’t the ones writing those plays, and they’re not the ones performing them. All art is political, even if it isn’t intended to be. Whether they know it or not, those writers are writing how they want the world to be, and the gentry are watching to make themselves believe that world could never be anything but fiction.”

China wanted to pant, but kept his voice smooth. “Spoken so surely. Are you a writer or some other artist, perhaps?”

“I enjoy poetry, but I don’t write anything more than articles,” the man answered. “But I’m familiar with both circles of society. I’m from a land-owning family in Hunan.”

A landlord's son that thought the peasantry should own their own land? A man who should have only benefited from the oppression of women, or at least considered himself unaffected by it, wanting to see them stand equal with him?

"Fascinating," China purred.

He was standing right next to him now, looming over him much too close, but the man wasn't retreating. He looked defiantly at him, his eyes almost even with China's.

"What's your name?" he asked, and the man's reply brushed against his skin.

Not a courtesy name, but his real name, plain, but solid. China could see it being used in a story.

"Well, friend," he said. "Perhaps I'll consider all you've said. In the meantime, maybe you could point me towards a few of the books you've been doing your answer-searching in." He tipped his head, smiling. "And maybe when I return them, we can speak more."

The man's eyes glowed as he reached behind him without looking, placing a book in his hands.

"Maybe."

China left the library with a few cover titles, and more hidden on his person, books by Peter Kropotkin, and some copies of a university newspaper, *New Youth,* with articles penned by the head librarian about the October Revolution in Russia and the ongoing actions of the Bolsheviks in the northern country.

China devoured the writings, coming to the conclusion that neither he nor his muse would find their answers in anarchism, though he found the seeds of them. In the articles, however…

There was real promise in the Bolshevik Revolution. Not China's promise, but promise.

He only met with the young man once more before he left Beijing, but their conversation lasted long into the night, the candle burning

low as China asked question after question, and he answered them all willingly, that restless, fiery look never leaving his eyes. And when he left, his Countryhuman kept his articles secreted away in his sleeves, rubbing them with his fingers until the ink had blurred.

He spoke with the head librarian- Li Dazhao- and the school chancellor, men and women who called themselves Communists and anarchists and Nationalists and just people who wanted to make China better, and they knew what he was asking, and gave him answers that made sense, and explanations for why things were this way, and how they should change.

China didn't agree with all of them, but it was all information, all knowledge that he slotted into his own understanding of how the world worked, how it should work, how *China* should work.

The May Fourth Movement came and went, the students marched in Tiananmen Square, protesting the relinquishing of Shandong and everything else that needed to be protested, and while China hadn't been able to sneak out for it (a 'conveniently'-timed dinner with the president), as he took leave from his tower after, he could see that spark in even more people's eyes.

Their country was backwards, they said, and needed to change. But not towards Western values- towards new Chinese ones.

His muse briefly returned in winter, and China sent him off with translations of books he'd been borrowing from his cast of muses- Kautsky, Kirkup, Marx and Engels. He wanted to see if they'd resonate with him like they had with the country. And then he was off again.

The years passed, Jingjing grew older, sprouting up like a little flower to grow even with his chest. He taught her how to do opera make-up and dance, and she taught him how to paint himself like a prostitute and act like a woman, though she wasn't quite aware of that. She finished learning her characters and could read well enough now that they quoted poetry to each other, or sat in silence with her on the sofa-bed and him on the floor, reading medical texts and philosophy and economics. He practiced her expressions and fed her stolen food, she tried to figure out how his magic tricks

worked, he put on puppet shows and plays for her, he watched her paint and the light in her brown eyes gutter with every man she had to please.

The Anhui clique fell, the Fengtian clique joined the Zhili clique in Beijing, the provinces grew more and more rebellious, each declaring that *they* were who should be the Chinese Countryhuman, and the warlords that ruled them waged battles to solidify their claim, the Beijing cliques fell out, the Fengtian clique was forced to retreat, and the men of the old parliament returned to Beijing, like nothing had ever changed.

And nothing ever did.

Bribery, corruption, factionalism, all of it was openly rife in the government, and none of China's poking and prodding and subtle manipulations could guide any of them down a better path. It never had.

Money. Power. That was all they wanted. Every single man only wanted what was best for them.

It was boring, the most base of motivations. And while a flat villain in a play could still be interesting because of his themes alone, and what he represented, all these men represented was the same thing as usual, and the end of China.

Amidst it all, he couldn't stop thinking of the young man with intense eyes.

He hadn't been an artist, but that spark, that desire to *create* had been inside him. Even when China didn't agree with all his views, it intrigued him that he'd been able to reach them at all. A man that society had been built for declaring that society was *wrong,* looking China in the eyes and declaring that he needed to change.

Out of all his muses, the people he was observing, he was most fascinated by him, even more so after he heard he'd helped overthrow a Changsha warlord. He wanted to see how his opinions would continue to change, how he would grow and develop. He wanted to cut his skull open and examine his brain up close, to find

out what he thought about *everything*.

So when Li Dazhao of the newly-formed Communist Party of China told him his former assistant was in Shanghai, China went. It was easy- all he had to do was find the men taking money from the Anhui clique, which was still in control of the city, and convince them he wanted to speak with the old figureheads. And pay off his guards, of course.

The port city was ancient and sprawling, an eclectic mix of French, British, Japanese, and all the other foreign nations that had been allowed to cut a piece of him off. The smell of rot came in off the sea, thick and briny.

He went to the Second Communist Party Congress first, to listen to their discourse. China would say he had become a Marxist, more or less. The man's scientific framework for observing the course of history made sense.

But he wouldn't call himself a Communist. Though he approved of most of their ideas, he thought them too… orthodox. They believed that only the proletariat of the cities had revolutionary potential. But China didn't believe that was true.

Weren't the bulk of China's masses out in the country? Didn't they slave away all their lives with no hope of a future? Their circumstances might make them tend towards conservatism, but wasn't that just because they didn't have the hope for progress? If they were *given* that hope, they had more to gain than anyone.

He had watched from the window of his car as they passed ramshackle villages and small farms, illiterate men and women in dusty clothes with hollow cheeks, slaving under the shadows of walled manors with tile roofs. China was sure they would fight harder than anyone for the change they needed.

He was disappointed to find that his muse wasn't at the Congress, though Li Dazhao had told him he was the Party secretary in Hunan, and should have been. Evidently, Marx and Engels *had* resonated as much with him as his country.

So China ditched his guards and took to the streets, wandering through dark alleys filled with the smell of stale alcohol and homecooked meals and piss, listening to the racket of foreign languages and the pleasant chatter of all the Chinese ones.

China liked these moments more than anything, when he could melt into the darkness of his cities and become one with the people in them. He slipped by women carrying bags of groceries, men heading home after a long day of work, and children weaving in and out of crowds, all unaware that their Countryhuman was among them.

But he never stopped observing, and couldn't be blind to the weary eyes of the women, the bent backs of the men, and the thin, grubby faces of the children. How many of them were married to cruel men with no escape? How many worked too long in a factory for too little, with no hope of ever resting? How many of the little girls with ribbons in their hair would have them torn out by fat fingers clutching handfuls of coin, and end up like Zhao Jingjing?

'Change change change.' China was crying for it.

He found him returning home to a hostel, running a hand down his handsome face. China trailed him with the evening crowd, sticking close to the sides of the dirty storefronts before darting down a side alley, swiftly winding his way up until he was ahead of him.

He waited, heart pounding in anticipation, until the man's familiar shadow darkened the brick wall, then darted out, seizing him by the collar and pulling him into the darkness of a nearby shed, closing the door.

His muse had yelped when he'd first grabbed him, but as China took his hand off his mouth, he laughed, his warm breath ticking his palm.

"That's you, isn't it?" he asked, reaching out to put a hand over China's face, feeling its oval shape.

"Unless someone else doesn't have a nose," China replied.

“Lepers,” they both said in unison, then quietly laughed.

Despite the relatively little time they’d spent together, China felt more at ease with him than any of the people he’d spent these past ten years with, aside from Jingjing. He could tell the other man felt the same way. Something inside him was drawing him to his country the same way his country was drawn to him. That spark.

The shed was small, and they were squished between mildewy wood and the door. His muse leaned back against the tin wall, so China leaned against the opposite one, trapping him between his legs, though the man wasn’t trying to flee.

“You missed the Congress,” China said, keeping his voice low. “I was looking forward to hearing you speak.”

The man gave a sheepish chuckle. “Would you believe me if I said I lost the address?”

China smiled. “Unfortunately yes. Your comrades have agreed to work with the Kuomintang, by the way.”

“Good,” his muse appraised. “The national revolution comes before the Socialist one. All our classes need to unite to free our country from the Imperialists if we’re to free it completely.”

“Your Countryhuman who has to deal with our lovely government might disagree.”

“Personally or principally?”

“If I say principally, will that convince you to overthrow them tomorrow?”

“I would if I could,” his muse murmured with raw sincerity. “But the more chaos our governors fall into, the more chances Japan has to seize more territory.”

“Then it’s only personally,” China sighed dramatically. “So you approve of allying with the Kuomintang?”

“Yes,” his muse said confidently.

China reached out, finding his arm in the dark, idly running his thumb over the soft fabric of his changshan. “They’ll betray you, you know.”

The man snorted in amusement, his knee nudging the inside of his Countryhuman’s thigh. “You’re seeing betrayal before the work’s even begun.”

“It’s how plays always end,” China informed him.

“Then it’s a good thing life isn’t a play.”

“Just a word of warning, so I can say ‘I told you so,’ when it happens.”

China asked him how he’d been doing, learning about his new wife, and their activities in Hunan. They’d been organizing schools to teach rural workers literacy, tying the struggle of the local miners into that of the women, helping those from all strata realize their place in society, and how it needed to change. The Countryhuman poked and prodded, trying to crack his head open and drink his thoughts as he idly toyed with his sleeve.

He was changing, growing, becoming more ‘radical’ as they said. The word excited China. That was the kind of change they needed. ‘Overthrow, destroy, remake.’ Those were all good words, too.

When his muse was done, China trailed his fingers down his arm until he reached the warm skin of his hand, rougher now than when they’d first met. He couldn’t see it, so he had to run a thumb over the man’s calluses to find them.

His muse suddenly closed his fingers around his. “If you hate what’s happening so much, why don’t you leave?”

China hummed, not attempting to free himself. “Once I see a good chance for change, and once I know what change I’m looking for, I will.”

“Are we not good enough?” The question wasn’t angry or hurt. It was just a question, trying to puzzle out his country’s mind, the way he did to him.

“Not yet,” China replied coyly. “But when you are, why don’t you come get me?”

He smiled, squeezing his muse’s hand, then slid out of the woodshed.

He watched from on top of a nearby roof as the man darted out after a second, looking around, trying to find him. He squinted directly at China’s hiding place, then shook his head, letting out a fond sigh before heading back out into the Shanghai streets, tossing one final call over his shoulder.

“Why don’t *you* come get *me?”*

China smiled.

Two more years passed. He met with Hebei, then was never able to again. None of the provinces answered his secretly-sent letters, whether out of their desire to be China or because they had censors, too. The final holding of the Anhui clique fell as another war broke out between the Zhili and Fengtian cliques over it. With the Beijing army at the front, it was the perfect time for a coup, which China could have told the president was coming, if he’d bothered to. But he hadn’t, and the man was placed on house arrest, Puyi was finally booted from the Forbidden City, parliament was dissolved (again), and Duan Qirui was brought back for the… third? fourth? time, the number didn’t matter anyway because nothing ever changed and there was no breaking point it was finally just *enough.*

Or maybe there was a breaking point. Maybe when Zhao Jingjing, now freshly nineteen, told him she’d had to teach an eleven year-old girl how to please a man a week ago, that had been it.

Jingjing lay on his sofa-chair with her head in his lap as he brushed the curls from her fashionably short hair with his fingers. She was likely too old for them to touch this casually anymore, but neither of them cared. For his part, China felt like she really was his little sister. And he suspected for her it was a way to feel like a child again, young and still unblemished by the world.

China ran his eyes over her latest portrait, another of that house

in the village. The details were changed now, blurry and indistinct, a fading memory of safety whose fire no longer glowed from the doorway.

He'd always liked the little sibling characters in plays. Usually he preferred more complex archetypes, not the simple straightforward goodness of a little sister or brother. But what they represented was enough to catch his interest in the same way as a more complicated character.

Innocence. When a protagonist set forth on a quest of noble vengeance that turned into a sea of blood, blurring the lines between hero and villain, you could tell on which side of the line he fell in the end by how he treated the little sibling he'd left at home. Did he turn his back on them because he didn't want to sully them, too, or did he cut them off without a second thought? Or did he go home and gather them into his arms and promise to never let them go again?

And when the little sibling died, it was the death of innocence.

What did it say about China then that they put their innocents up for sale? What did it say about China if he didn't do everything he could to stop it, to *change* it?

It didn't matter if the rest of the world was like this. China wasn't the rest of the world. They were better, they could *be* better.

"Meimei," China murmured, tucking a strand of her inky hair behind her ear.

Jingjing opened her red bean eyes, looking blearily up at him. "Mm?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

The girl shot up, looking at him in surprise. "What?"

China didn't smile at her. "I'm leaving the tower."

"Oh." Her throat flexed. "Did… Did your hero come?"

“No,” he said. “But I’m tired of waiting to be rescued. Our country needs to change. I’m going to go change it.”

It was finally time. After he’d been rebuffed for the things he’d instinctively felt, told his ideas were crazy and impossible, he’d sat back, observing, gathering information, *learning* until he was sure he’d been right, that China knew what China wanted and from the very beginning had been *right*.

And now it was time to start working on *making* it right.

The girl- woman gave him a tremulous smile. “I’ve been wondering when you would. Maybe after you do… you can come be my hero.”

“I have no desire to be a hero, meimei,” China told her. That wasn’t his role. “But I’ll support ours. And one day, I’ll come back and knock down your tower.”

He smiled. "And if anything, you were *my* hero.”

“Me?” She blinked. “How?”

“Figure it out,” he teased. “You’re my clever little future doctor after all.”

Her words hadn’t been empty. Every book on medicine he’d found for her had been eagerly devoured and retained. She was smart enough to save lives. The society they lived in would simply never give her the chance.

Jingjing's face was so familiar to him that he could tell the difference between when she bit her lip to hide a lie and when she did it trying not to cry. He knew it was the latter now as her teeth slotted into the permanent dent she’d left in it.

“I’ll miss you.”

He’d had the privilege of getting to listen to her voice deepen over the past few years, taking on the throaty hum of a woman’s. But right now she sounded like a child again.

“I’ll miss you, too, meimei,” he said.

Grief wasn’t a new emotion. He felt it every time he walked the streets and saw his people suffering, and during the best of plays. But this time it was harder to mask.

Jingjing leaned into him, gripping him tight, crying into his chest like the first night they’d met.

“I’ll visit if I can,” China murmured, stroking her hair.

“Take me with you,” she whispered, squeezing him. “Please take me away. I don’t care if I have to leave my sister behind, just… *Please.”*

“You don’t mean that,” China chided, gently tugging on a strand of hair. “You’ll take care of your meimei, just like I took care of mine.”

Her shoulders shook, her tears soaking into his stomach.

He wished he could take her. But he knew the path he was walking wasn’t fit for a woman fresh out of girlhood who had never learned anything but how to please. China had a role to play, and being an instructive older brother wouldn’t fit into it.

“Just hold on until we change the world.” His grip on her tightened. “Promise me, meimei.”

“You always ask me so many questions.” Her voice was shaky as she looked up at him with tear-stained eyes. “It’s my turn to ask you one. Do you really think you can?”

She wasn’t asking to be told there was nothing to worry about. She was asking for the truth.

“Of course I can, meimei.”

And for the first time since they’d met, China dropped the fake voice he had always put on for her, the vaguely childish, harmless man with no desires, letting the sharp edges of his smile bleed through.

“I’m arrogant, Little Sister,” he purred, smooth as silk. “And I’m sick of our country not being the best when I know it is. America, Britain, Japan. For five thousand years, China has been better than *all* of them. And I know we can be again. Cars, music, dances, democracy.”

He tilted her chin up with a finger, swiping his thumb over her cheekbone. “The defense of our people. I can be better than them at *everything*. I know it.”

Jingjing didn’t look disturbed by the dropping of his mask. She just shut her eyes, her features softening.

“Then…” She took a shuddering breath. “I promise.”

China relaxed. She was still sincere, even now. In return, he didn’t put his fake voice back on.

“Good.” He buried his face in her sweet-smelling hair, hoping this wouldn’t be the last time he saw his little sister.

Early in the morning, he woke her from his lap, dressed her in her coat, and walked her to the door. He handed her a note.

She could read it now, and her eyes widened as she did, before realization dawned in them.

“Just so you don’t cry your little heart out if the news makes it to you,” China said, taking it back.

“Thank you.” Tears welled in her brown eyes, glistening like glass beads on a chandelier. “For everything.”

“Thank you, meimei.” She had been the catalyst, the one to speed his observation up. And to make him feel as deeply as he should.

He walked her to the gate, opening it up. She gave him one last look, and while the guards couldn’t see, raised her fist, pressing it to her heart.

China watched her figure, small in the snowy winter’s morning, march across the entry courtyard and out the front gate.

And then she was gone.

Then he shut the inner doors, and dropped his letter on the ground, heading back to the main hall.

He should wait until it was dark again, but he didn't want to. Now that his mind was made, he couldn't wait another second.

China was sick of waiting for change. It was time to *create* it.

He dressed in the stolen uniform of a man that had been too out of it to notice, breathing in the cloyingly sweet smell of poppy smoke that still clung to the fabric, letting it clear his mind instead of what it was supposed to do.

'Wake up.'

To the back rooms, getting what he needed, going around to every big empty building in his hutong, then returning to the main hall.

He placed his hand on the painting Jingjing had painted all those years ago. The romantic in him wanted to take only that. The pragmatist packed his bag full of the bits of money he'd been secretly stockpiling, along with cans of food, warm clothes, and a few expensive pieces of jewellery to sell. The only useless things he kept were the shrunken head, the sketch of that beloved woman, and Jingjing's chandelier, the thing that had drawn him to her in the first place. Then, like everything else, he drenched the artwork in the gasoline he'd been siphoning from his cars for years.

He would help his people create a new dream of safety and home for Jingjing, and for *all* of them.

When the place went up, the guards would likely rush right in. It might be at least noon before they found the suicide note he'd left at the gate. And he was, of course, the sort of person to kill himself, the sort of lazy, idle, degenerate sleaze to grow tired of life and off himself with no regard to how it would cause the country to crumble. He wasn't the sort to help others or hold any great morals or ideals. He had hidden all those well away when they'd first been rejected, understanding even then how this was going to go.

Now China had to die for China to change.

He lit the east and west side halls first, watching the flames flicker over the years of artwork and priceless antiques and useless trinkets he'd made and collected. He would leave no trace of who he had pretended to be for the last twelve years.

The back hall went next, and the kitchens that he'd experimented so often in. All his paints and canvases went up beautifully, replaced by a riot of scarlet and gold.

He took one last look around at the main hall, at the place he'd spent so many years in, and felt nothing.

He would create a dream of home for himself, too.

China had no intention of becoming a hero. He wanted to watch the ones who would, his muse and all his comrades. He would simply support them in what they wanted, the way a Countryhuman should, and make sure that when the revolution came it would be a *Revolution.* China didn't follow Western storylines. He wasn't the hero, and he wasn't the princess.

He was the lóng. And he was going to raze all their towers to the ground.

He struck the match, and Zhao Jingjing's art went up in flames.

Then he went out the back, past the tongues of fire starting to lick from the back hall, to the old plum tree that stood in the corner. He climbed up it easily, lithe and limber from all the exercises he'd done over the years, and stepped lightly onto the tile roof of the wall.

As thick black clouds of smoke filled the grey sky, shouts of alarm echoed from the front gates, and he heard them slam open as footsteps pounded towards the main hall.

The Republic of China smiled, and stepped off the edge.

He found him in Guangzhou, working for the Kuomintang's Central Executive Committee and preparing to leave for Shaoshan. China caught him outside the city. He could tell he knew who was behind him before he even turned around.

"So," China said, smiling, his bag slung over his shoulder. "Do you still think you can change China?"

His muse smiled back. "I *know* I can. And I know how."

"Then show me, Mao Zedong."

China held out his hand, and the man took it, grinning widely, his eyes alive with the desire to *create.* His Countryhuman flashed his teeth back, the fiery look mirrored in his own gaze.

And together, they set out to change China forever.

And so the truth about China's age is funnier than you could ever imagine. If you want to read the Zhao Jingjing reunion chapters in the second half of Chasing Liberty, they're Rising Fever and Last Little Sister.

I never had a set idea for China's backstory, I was leaving it a mystery for myself, too. But I got sick with a very bad fever and this was the only thing I could think of. I was curled in a ball shaking and was suddenly flash-banged with a vivid image of China embracing a young girl on a sofa-bed, then the story bloomed around it. I was genuinely trapped watching this chapter play out in my head around three times as I fazed in and out of consciousness for a day. The fever broke the next day and I wrote this in a few hours. So I think 'divine vision' is a good enough reason to clear up a bit of mystery. This is, of course, only part of China's life. There are a lot of strange things he's done in the rest of it that will remain mysteries. Unless I am blessed with another fevered vision.

The reason he kept the shrunken head is because it was one of his people, and made by one of his people. He has laid it to rest by modern day. Probably.

China fully acknowledged himself as a Communist after the April 12th Incident in 1927, when the Kuomintang massacred Communists in Shanghai. He did still work with them after that, but that was his 'the non-Communists are part of those that only want to serve themselves. They bore me, and they will not be the ones to decide China's course' moment. Also by then peasants were becoming a big part of the Communist movement.

Also Comrade Mao Zedong did write poetry, but he didn't start until a few years after when he and China met. I like to think there's a collection of his poems about China that sort of make modern day people go 'Hmmmm. Were they…?' But you can never really tell if he's talking about China or *China* so there's plausible deniability. He also probably wasn't sure himself.

A lóng and his little duckling.

Chasing Liberty Spoilers??

[image] [image] [image]

[image]

Sneak peek of the final chapter of Chasing Liberty. I know, very bold of me to spoil it when there's definitelynotoverahundred chapters left.
I was tearing up the entire time I drew this. I keep thinking about it and giggling. I'm going to get my titledrop in the epilogue, I don't care how cheesy it is.

Not Chasing Liberty spoilers, this next one is just South's power fantasy.

And even in South's mind, if he had North at his most vulnerable, he would still be wearing the eyepatch because he doesn't want to face what he has done.

I feel like I shouldn't have to clarify that the nudity isn't sexual in any way, but as we know there are FREAKS out there, so I am clarifying it. Not sexual. It's symbolic. And maybe also because I can't draw clothes when I use this lineless method. But that is unverified.

I heard this song, Sleeptalking by Indigo De Souza, and I started crying because it made me think of North and South. Go listen. I am so fond of my son and his milky sock of a brother.

Yesterday I only ate a glass and bowl of taro-flavoured milk filled with taro-flavoured dango. I am very healthy. If you ever want to make Mystery Soup it's one large scoop mochiko, smaller amount of sugar, as much soft tofu as you need to make a dough, roll into different size orbs and boil, then put in milk of any flavour. I like coconut milk mixed with taro-flavoured milk. You can also flavour the dango. Or you can just eat plain dango in normal milk. If you

think you don't deserve happiness, you can even take the sugar out. This is good warm and cold. Last night I dreamed I died in a huge storm on a beach with my friend. This could be related to my awful calorie intake or it could be a prophecy.

(also the Chainsaw Man panel the first picture is referencing)

Great War Of Justice

[image] [image] [image] [image][image] [image]

It is insane how quickly the world has stopped being outraged that the US literally invaded a country, kidnapped their president and his wife, and have been holding them hostage for almost five months while not letting his government pay for his legal representation. I cannot state enough that if a country had even *unsuccessfully* attempted this on America, their civilian causalities would be in the hundreds of thousands by now. This genuinely makes me so furiois every time I think about it. Meanwhile Netanyahu is wanted for genocide and people won't even arrest him on their soil.

And thus the 'No talking to tourists' rule was made. (Not canon, but only because North made that rule for the provinces ahead of time knowing he had to stop them from doing things like this)
They're also discouraged from letting tourists see them (just random groups, not people there for official things). This has led to them having to do stealth mission-level maneuvers to leave the high-rise if a tour group is visiting Kim Il-sung Square.
Some of them find this annoying as really, even if a tour guide doesn't notice someone snapping a photo of them, what is the enemy going to do with it? But North has the insistence of someone who believes taking a photo of someone steals part of their soul. Though he has also had to clarify that if you're already seen, you just need to calmly remove yourself from the foreigners' field of view, not take off running mid-conversation with a comrade with the frantic energy of someone being shot at, which Hae has definitely never done.
South Pyongan finds this fun. She likes to stalk tour groups and reveal herself nearby just to cause problems, then disappear before anyone can sneak a picture. If you're going to walk around ogling at her country, might as well ogle the best thing in it (her). Coincidentally, she has the most non-blurry photos on foreign internet.

In real life, the DPRK doesn't have the 'no photos ever!!' rule people like to pretend. There's rules about photographing the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il statues for respect (not cutting parts of them out), but the only things you're absolutely forbidden from photographing are military/political sites, which is pretty much universal. Other things tend to range on the tour companies bases. In-universe, North and the Provincehumans count as military sites.

The clarification between SH and Hae's 'cooking' styles. Hae knows how to cook. She has a perfect understanding of a nutritionally balanced meal. She can season and prepare things properly. She can *also* get distracted and walk away while she has something on the stove or in the oven and cause a house fire, or distract someone else enough that they do. And she has.
SH does *not* know how to cook. There is a fundamental disconnect between her seasonings. It's something about how she can't just accept a recipe or flavour. She needs to have some sort of control over it. Kangwon hands her the namul he gathered and tells her to put a handful of leaves in the pot? Surely two would taste better and add more to eat. Recipe says simple shoyu dip? What if we added salt? We live in a modern age, surely we have enough gochujang to not be skimpy when it comes to kimchi... This affects her art, too. Red paint can't just be red, she needs to add a bit of another colour to give it an undertone or more warmth. This makes her a very good artist. It does not make her a good cook.

I like to think the Korean version of this is canon. North made SH paint her own anti-SH propaganda poster to put on the kitchen door. It just gets taken down when they have visitors (SH sprinted downstairs to tear it down after Y/N moved in). Even North, who doesn't care about the taste of food, has a limit. That limit is six spoons of sugar in the jjajangmyeon sauce and also almost losing the kitchen to fire.

I promised I would show my take on Nepal's flag. Square head man. I like to think he has no strong principles. He says he's a religious man focused on spiritual affairs, and this keeps him out of being blamed for any political issues.

I think I saw this on 4shiro's Pinterest (Hi). I saw this somewhere anyway. I refuse to elaborate.

I love this because this is how I feel when I go out with my friends. Still not elaborating.

Gay People

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Happy pride month! ^^
The queers of the main cast (and a few others). There are obviously more. Belarus is lesbian but no she isn't and only sleeps with men. Mongolia and Peru are genderless (Peru presents as female but literally has a genderless body) but they wouldn't consider themselves x-gender, it's more Countryhuman stuff. Netherlands is gay but he's also a rapist colonizer so we don't talk about him. Qinghai is x-gender. Sichuan is obviously a lesbian. And many more, considering how many countries and subdivisions there are. Most Country/Provincehumans that are queer aren't out because even in progressive (or 'progressive') countries, a large amount of people don't actually accept gay people, so politically it's better to just keep quiet to maintain popular support.

Cuba is one of the few openly gay Countryhumans. I like to think he realized, confessed to Fidel, and that coincided with him apologizing for how they'd treated gay people, then turning Cuba into one of the most progressive countries in that regard. He is also a doctor that smokes cigars. Vietnam doesn't necessarily hide being bisexual, but she doesn't just tell people. And as mentioned before, only those close to her know she's transgender, with her people she just pretends joining the Soviet Union changed her body. She's always known she was into men and women, and sort of just realized she identified more with being a woman over the recent decades, though she couldn't transition until she had an excuse. Cuba lives out Kangwon's dream of performing surgery on his partner by giving her her transgender operation. South Jeolla has a girlfriend, and her sexuality was exposed by sasaeng, but South paid for it to be covered up so she wouldn't lose face. Post-Warring Pyongyang Korea just tells her to keep it quiet (she's broken up with her girlfriend by then). SH will never come out. Ever. She never intends to date, so she sees no reason to. We all know the Kangwon coming out chapter. He was formed knowing he was into men, and it has never once bothered him. But he can't tell anyone else but

their inner circle so he doesn't lose prestige or respect. UIP is out to the Koreans (because he's with Kangwon) and CCCP (he's aware of the trips taken across the Soviet Union), but won't tell his family (Lebanon and his governorates) for awhile. They're still adjusting to him being part Israel, best not to drop the gay thing on them, too. Gangwon used to be gay when he and Kangwon were one, but lost it after they were split. Being asexual distressed him at first (ironically, since being gay never did, but it was more the sudden loss, and how he didn't realize until post-war, so the idea that the isolation America and South put him in screwed him up so badly he lost his sexuality on top of his hearing freaked him out, the idea that something inside him broke), but he's learned and adapted, and is fine with it now. North does not consider himself asexual and would actively deny being it. He's normal, everyone else is a filthy degenerate. (he's asexual)

Also there aren't two Vietnams, those are her pre and post-transition, to show off how her casual clothes differ (you can see she has a set style). Think of the outfits like thin sweaters that have aspects of ao dai.

The only flag Kangwon stands for is the red, white, and blue. **K P K P K P**

Hmmm. Kangwon and Cuba are doctors, and Israel was a 'physician.' And Kim Yong-hwan and An Il-rae... Do I have some sort of subconscious bias about people in the healthcare field being gay? I don't think I have never even heard about a gay doctor or nurse. Why did this happen.

Also I feel the need to clarify the 'Kangwon dreams of performing surgery on his partner' part. It's not some weird kink about hurting him. It's part of his 'I need to fix people' thing, and also applies to North and the other provinces. If surgery could help UIP stabilize, he would leap to do it because it would be a tangible, certain way to help. Also he has medical curiosity when it comes to advancing healthcare. Like if someone came to him and asked for a transgender surgery (he has no professional knowledge of how to do that), the *only* thing stopping him would be his position as a member of the Worker's Party. If he thinks a medical procedure will

help, he'll pretty much try anything so long as he has consent. Genuinely if him and Hwang fused, they would be at risk of performing unethical medical experiments.

I wrote this while suffering from semi-heatstroke. I only corrected spelling mistakes so the original delirious tone is kept.

New call of duty game about the DPRK destabilizing the world by attacking South Korea when it's always been SK that has the forced Reunification policy and the DPRK literally just said screw Reunification at all if you have American bases there, we don't want any part of you. Yeah that would be crazy if a country attacked another country for no reason and destabilized the entire world. Imagine if that country attacked a country that controlled access to the strait through which most oil passes and attacking it caused them to close the strait and put oil prices through the roof. That would be crazy. That would be really fucking crazy huh. It would be insane. Imagine if the DPRK did that wouldn't that be fucking crazy. Wouldn't that make up for the Americans butchering over 20 percent of their population alone, not counting the South, like dogs then mass starving them with sanctions? Imagine if they did that it would be awful. Isn't it so great that the US can destroy your country and do everything it can to stop you from prospering, then make a video game that costs more than most people in that country *or* theirs can make a year so they can pretend they're killing your people again and manufacture consent against you so that they can do it for real? Isn't it so cool that they can just do that over and over and over. The average American froths at the mouth, saliva gushes from their flabby, hamburger filled *jowls* at the thought of murdering foreigners, but every time they do they're in the wrong so they have to make up alternate reality scenarios where the victims they're slaughtering are the bad guys so they can get off to it guilt free. Bloodthirsty psychotic freaks.

Chew Toy

[image] [image] [image]

years later

You all thought this chapter would be about North. Wrong. He has only bitten China ~~once~~ never in his life. He has more self-control than that. Russia does not.
Also the dark spot on China's changshan is supposed to be saliva, but it does seem like he's just majorly bleeding. Could be both, really.

CCCP is pretty minimalist when it comes to buying things (his house is cluttered, but it's mostly homemade stuff), but I like to think he has a large collection of aprons. Some are pink, some are spotted or lacy, some say 'Best Dad.' He owns seven casual shirts and at least twenty aprons, usually bought by the kids as 'birthday' presents.

5629262660752438
I have this number saved to my copy-paste pins. I don't know what it means. It's not my ID for anything, I know. Possible prediction for amount of chapters in Chasing Liberty? Hmmm.

通过暴力到达天堂
I also have this. I do know what this is.

This won't make sense to you if you don't know Pokemon, but recently I wanted to replay Pokemon Y. I start it up to check my old team first. I have a level 89 Eneko, a level 82 Talonflame, a level 78 Venasaur (I don't like Venasaur as much as I like Charizard so I don't know why I chose it), a level 86 Braixen I gave a stone so it would never evolve? (I LOVE it's evolution so I don't know what I would do that), a level 81 Lapras, and a level 80 Raichu. I also own almost no Pokemon and have named my boxes in random letters and numbers. I feel like I was hacked but you can't hack a 3ds I don't think. I only remember ever playing one file and it was NOT this one. Yet I know in my heart that having an Eneko be level 89 is

something only I would do, and it had the nickname I always give it (Eni-chan). I beat the game with these Pokemon. Somehow.
Then I start looking through my other Pokemon files. Pokemon White 2 had a Dewott that I had also given a no-evolve stone to. Which is a major handicap in those games, and I don't play with handicaps. And again, I love its evolution. But ALSO I usually choose Snivy for those games. I don't like the water line as much. Though in this case I know it was a replay because I remember restarting. I genuinely have no idea what was going through my mind. I love Pokemon. I wish Nintendo wasn't evil.

China/North Kiss??

[image] [image] [image] [image]

North's most recent and first time receiving flowers. I wanted to draw him in the Youth League scarf Kim Jong-un was wearing at the Children's Union founding ceremony. He looked so cute in it.

Also the long-awaited picture of North and China kissing. Well, more like China kissing North.

I clickbaited you, as they say. I saw this picture and thought 'Ah. That's them.' The realistic version would be North beating him into the side of the car. I wasn't going to ever post this because it's not very well done (I was just drawing it to giggle), but people wanted it.

By the way, I'm sure you'll all be interested, technically the DPRK has an official pairing name for their country and China. They shorten the country names in their friendship banners/posters. It's 조중 (chojung) You can see it at the recent Uncle Xi recent visit. 조중친선. I like to think that whenever China or Russia visit for those big official visits where they hang up pictures of them and put on the 'We're best friends ^^' performances, North spends the entire time wanting to die. North grudgingly giving a 'DPRK and Russia are close comrades united in fighting fascism and our friendship will last forever' speech and he can tell that all the work he's done telling Russia that they are not family, never have been family, and never will be family has just gone out the window. If Russia had a tail it would be wagging. North and China are watching the 'I Love You China' singing performance. China smiles at him while North refuses to look. There are nail marks on his seat after from how hard he was fighting not to just slug him in the stomach in public. They listen to 'DPRK-China Friendship Will Be Everlasting,' and get to the 'firm hand held on the path to Socialism' part. China says 'Aw, you want to hold hands with me?' Cameras capture North leaning over to say something to him, which makes them look

friendly. He is fiercely whispering 'I will *kill* you.' The worst part about having allies is having to acknowledge that you don't actually hate them. 'You aren't my friends' as the 'You're my best friends forever' song that he had to personally approve plays.

Also on the subject of nicknames, it is important that you know that some of the province nicknames are real nicknames of the Korean provinces, like Chungbuk and Chungnam. If Hae used SH's actually province nickname it would be Hamnam. But that was too hard for her to say when she couldn't speak Korean, so SH made it Hana. It's just important for you to know that she's also called Hamnam by people sometimes. My choice of who gets a real nickname and who gets a made up one is, as always, based on vibes. I finally have China-nicknames for all the Chinese provinces, and they are even more varied.

Very excited by the Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un meet. ^^ Rumour has it that the table at the Kumsusan hall is so wide so that China can't play footsie with North under the table. Rumour has it he's very put out by this. North is not.

Friend asked if I wanted a cream cheese bun and I said yes without looking at the display. Why was it an entire block of cream cheese between thin bread. What are we creating. Is this confection culture now. I can't get black bread without promising another firstborn, but I can get a cream cheese lump the size of a child's fist. It was literally like biting into a chunk of sweet cream cheese. Because that's what it was. It was actually really good but I feel like I can't eat anything sweet for a week.

Gold Dust

[image]

China lore (you have to squint)(and have read a recent Chasing Liberty chapter)

Comrades... Did I actually draw something good?? There's a feeling of pride in my chest.

I'm writing an in-depth summary of Hyun Han-jin and Tae-min to go with a one-shot I wrote for North Pyongan. I was hoping to post it while it's still pride month, but I can't until a certain Chasing Liberty chapter that I don't think will be done in time. > > But it will come.

[image]

Also an older picture of Gangwon (about to be subjected to the horrors) that I'll redraw for the full scene someday. But I think he looks cute here (but clearly not cute enough to escape the whip)

World Cup showing well why sports are used for propaganda.
Person rich enough to take time off work and travel across the world to watch sports in a country with an enormous homeless population, dying social programs, glorified concentration camps and armed men going around abducting people off the streets while it's also murdering millions of people across the world and funding genocide: Uwaaaa suigoiiiiii! Look at this huge burger! It's just like the movies, America is so awesome and cool! > <
Everyone at home too stupid or unwilling to pay any attention to politics only seeing the pictures those rich people choose to post: Uwaaaaa sugoiiiii! America is so awesome and cool! ^^'
They are KILLING CHILDREN.

Unrelated to anything else, the chapter title is making me think of Dishonoured 2. The Brigmore Lullaby has always been Russian Revolution related to me. In general it's just like a Russian lullaby.

Very menacing.
That game has some of the best music. 'Take your silver spoon and dig your grave.'

Mysterious Blood

[image]

[image]

[image]

Rare 'no pin' moment because if one of their pins gets torn off while fighting, South Pyongan will pay for it. It's like North's power inhibitor.

I LOVE the DPRK sports jackets in this style. Now that I have my own money I WILL get one.

Thinking about North having to get somewhere quickly, so he has to pass a tour group instead of creeping around them. The tourist has a monologue in his head like 'Oh my god, that's North Korea. He looks so angry, he's radiating a dark energy, I can feel it from across the street, so scary.' And then on the other side of the road is a North Korean couple and the woman says, 'Oh, Comrade Korea seems like he's in a good mood today!' And the man smiles and agrees.

Me being depressed. Don't read this next part if you don't want to be depressed.

I had a long cry about the reforms in Cuba. They're not the 'fall of Socialism in Cuba' like gusanos and Yankees are saying (and ultras that are smug about people dying just because they get to say they were 'right'). They're still Socialist, and they've added Socialist protections, I know. And maybe I would have cried over the reforms in China if I'd been alive when they were first started (and now today China is arguably the most powerful country in the world, and *the* most powerful Socialist one). But Cuba isn't China. They don't have the same amount of resources and the same ideological base. China got much worse before it became better,

there's a reason that stereotype about child workers and bad labour conditions existed about them in the 90s and early 2000's- they let capitalism in and people suffered for it. And yes they were able to make it through it and get rid of those capitalist practices with a stronger economy and the economic base needed for building Socialism so less people can suffer than ever before, but they had the ideological shock training needed for that. You can say what you want about the Cultural Revolution, but there's a strong case to be made that if the Chinese reforms had happened without it ever taking place, China could be another capitalist resource hub today, with all its workers stuck in the early 2000s and foreigners leeching it dry. And Cuba is in the shadow of the Empire. When China opened for trade and did their market reforms, they were able to get investment from dozens of nations easily. For Cuba, even though they've made recent deals with Russia and want to lean towards them and China for the foreign investment, America is the dominant force in the region. Countries can have market reforms without being capitalist when they need them to survive, like the DPRK did during the Arduous March. Ideological purity can't come before people's lives. But I feel like Cuba is opening up too much. They're baiting in gusano investment so that those wealthy Yankee footstools will beg their masters to lessen the embargo so they can sail back to Cuba and sick their claws into its people again. Cuba gets wealthier with this, but they also open up to spies, the US drug trade, regime change, and a strengthened reactionary base. These people are anti-Communists whose parents were practically slave owners. Some of them probably *are* the slave owners. They aren't going to be satisfied with a piece of the pie with supervision- they want *all* of it. They want to enslave their countrymen again and rule the nation, and America wants that to happen too. They're letting worms in, and I fear they're going to gnaw the core away. 'You think you know better than the Cuban Communists?' No. I don't. There are going to be ultraleftist types that say Cuba is stupid for this, like some armchair leftist in the Imperial Core knows better and the Cuban Communist Party hasn't been running their nation successfully for over 60 years. They aren't stupid. And they're not revisionists in the ideological sense. They are still Communists, they aren't doing this because they don't see the risks or are surrendering to America- they're doing it because they *have* to, because this is what is needed to protect their Revolution, even if it's a step back.

Because they actually *care* about the people they govern and those people are *dying.* The US completely restricts electricity and fuel, and has killed ten of thousands already, only recently. Cuba had a lower infant mortality rate than the US and an incredibly high life expectancy, and now thousands are dying in hospitals because they can't keep the machines running or get medicine to the shelves. And this isn't Socialism's fault. Despite all they've had to face, Cuba became one of the most medically advanced, progressive countries in the world *because* of Socialism. If it hadn't been for the Revolution, they'd be like Haiti or the other poor exploited Caribbean islands today. But because they are Socialist, they aren't allowed to exist normally in the world. Even when everyone in the it votes to lift the blockade multiple times, the US and Israel refuse. The US refuses to trade with them and blocks those who try, or fines and threatens to embargo them too. They are trying to starve them out, they're trying to kill them and overthrow Socialism so that Cuba can go back to being their tobacco and sugar plantation and the Cuban people can go back to being slaves. You can't say this decision is reckless when it's necessary. But I feel like necessary in the short run can lead to crumbling in the long run. The people in charge are Socialist now, but the more worms you let in with American blood money, the more likely that the next ones won't be. This isn't the fall of Socialism in Cuba, but it could be the start. And the Cuban Communists know that, they enacted the reforms knowing that, but they don't have any other choice. I don't want to be a doomer, but it's hard sometimes. With everything. It's unfair. The Cuban people have accomplished so much, they're so resilient, but they shouldn't *have* to be. Their real struggle should have ended after they freed their country from colonialism and dictatorship, they should only have to focus on the ideological one now. People should be able to govern their countries the way they want without some world police strangling them for the crime of wanting to be an independent nation, and for *all* their people to prosper instead of a few with wealthy foreign masters. They aren't like the US, they haven't bombed or invaded or starved anyone. They don't deserve this. Even if I'm being a anxious for nothing and China and Russia swoop in to be their biggest foreign investors and Cuba gets an economic boom big enough to build their productive base so that they can't be strangled again even after the reforms are undone, it's still unfair because *they shouldn't have to.* They shouldn't have to

change and risk losing the system they fought for and that's carried them so far because one other nation doesn't like it. No one should. I think that's what I'm crying over. I hope when America falls it implodes and I hope nothing is left. They don't deserve their own reform and they don't deserve the Socialism they've been strangling anyone for even thinking about attempting. They deserve to die.

Chic Ukraina

[image]

[image]

Outfit based on pieces from the Ulyana Sergeenko special collection (amazing Russian fashiondesigner). They're hundreds of thousands of rubles, but they are so tempting... I *could* afford those... But I shouldn't. You should look at the shop, the recent summer collection is so. cute. I like their more retro/Soviet inspired outfits.

She's wearing knee-high heeled boots under that skirt. Drawing it was an treacherous task. I like to draw her with both her flags because I like both of the colour schemes too much.

I don't understand people that use AI for writing. At least with art there's the clear motivation of using it to churn out pieces you can scam people out of money for, and professional writing can have the same excuse, but why would you ever use AI to write fanfiction? You aren't being paid for it. The point of writing fanfiction is because you're passionate about the subject and you like writing. But with AI, you aren't writing. You aren't even really thinking. You're just typing out an idea and receiving a soulless, uninspired story back. You can't even say 'I want to read this idea, but can't write,' because AI stories are never good. They're stilted, inhuman, can't explore emotions or themes properly, and literally can't do anything new because it requires stealing from writing that already exist. Humans 'steal,' too, but no matter how derivative something is, the author will always leave a piece of themselves in it. Anyone can write, it just takes practice, and I guarantee people will enjoy reading something amateur and imperfect over AI voice. Sometimes my hands can't keep up with my mind because my words are coming so fast, and I wish I could just put my thoughts on the page directly, but I want to put *my* thoughts, not some machine's (I would more want that radioactive alien typewriter from the Tommyknockers that takes her actual brainwaves and types them out so she can write while doing other things, but even

if I had that, I probably woudn't use it for anything but notes). The fun part about writing is choosing the words and crafting the sentences to say exactly what you want them to, and seeing where things go. I love when I'm in the middle of a chapter and suddenly realize I want it to go somewhere completely different, and I love editing because I get to go through and find better ways to phrase things. Some of my best story moments have come from me being hit with an idea in the middle of a paragraph and realizing what the character needs, and then I have three new chapters. That woudn't happen if I was just putting my chapter outlines into something and letting it write them for me. It takes away the actual creativity part of creation. I'm not saying anything people haven't said before, but it seriously confuses me. Moral reasons aside, why do you want to take the fun out of a fun thing?

Mangaka Cat

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

[image]

Guy that tortures and abuses women seeing a girl draw a torture and abused woman: Jesus, something's wrong with her head.

A notice: America calls Japan 'Japs' as a slur. I hate when I read a fanfiction and they have him calling her that as a cute nickname. I know they just don't know, but Jap *is* an English slur. America is using it on purpose here. It's what he always calls Japan. It makes her uncomfortable, both because it's a slur and because of the 'calling a Countryhuman by a nickname is denying thier sovereignty' part. She's nicely asked him not to call her that, but he just says she's too sensitive and says it's just a nickname. 'It's not like I'm just calling you Jap, God, calm down, you were a lot less fussy as a guy.' It's one of those little 'exercising control' things he does.

Japan can't feel embarrassment exactly, that is her approximating it. She can feel shame, though. She also usually wouldn't wear her schoolgirl uniform when she's not being used for publicity (it comes off the *moment* she gets home), but America likes when she wears it

(gag), so that's why she's wearing it here. He visited to go to one of his military bases, so she can't take it off until he gets back.

Japan is a secret mangaka. She creates a lot of one-shot manga under a fake identity. Her pen name is Himahina-chan (kanji up for debate), but she also has a made-up person to take the fall for her if she ever gets discovered. This is because she portrays exclusively very dark, gruesome subjects that would absolutely destroy her face and cause a scandal if people found out their Countryhuman was writing it. There's a lot of focus on young girls dying in brutal ways. She's working through some things. Most people agree that it's supposed to be ero guro and 'Himahina-chan' is probably some forty-year old man, but it's just her, and it's just supposed to be 'normal' gore (not really, it's more an expression of her trauma, both the abuse from America, the exploitation from her government, and her now sixteen-year old brain having to deal with the horrors she oversaw/committed as Imperial Japan). She only started after becoming a young girl herself, and the fact that most of the people who read her manga are men who see it as sexual material makes her uneasy. But she feels like she needs to write the dark things out of her because she 'isn't messed up like she used to be,' so if she gets them out and away she'll really just be the kawaii bubbly Japan most of the world sees her as. She also can't really feel things, so it's the only way to express that trauma.
The other portion of her fanbase is young girls being abused, because while men look at women's trauma and see sexual material, women look at it and see horror and their own lives, so it speaks to them.
She's not allowed to publish things like that after becoming a Soviet, but she still writes them and keeps them *very* well hidden. Though Nipponia is also being forced to find healthier ways to work through what is wrong with her.

China is the only one that knows about her secret, though he's never even hinted about it to threaten her because he doesn't want her putting out her work with the knowledge that he'll see it, in case she censors herself in some way. He can see the cry for help in it, but he doesn't pity her at all, seeing as she is a big part of the reason why her art speaks to him, too. He just thinks she's sick in the head and should be put down. He can't find much room for

empathy when some of those scenes are too familiar.

Glasses + Favourite Foods

[image]

[image]

Kim Il-sung enters the room and they both have to pretend North didn't just throw his glasses across the table like they were an active grenade.

One of the things Hae shares with North is their desire to emulate the people they admire. Except Hae is aware of it (her 'wearing black workshirts and slacks to look like North' phase), and with North it's more subconscious. He would rather *not* be missing an eye, but since he is, there's a little part of him that's pleased he's missing the same one as CCCP. SH makes him the clothes that match Kim Il-sung/Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un, but he's the one that unintentionally ends up wearing and matching with them. SH and Kangwon are his 'eldest daughter and son' because he can see so much of him in them. And once Kim Il-sung started wearing glasses, there were intrusive 'What if *I* had glasses?' desires. Even though North would *hate* needing glasses for multiple reasons (annoying; hates 'crutches'; it would be a visible weakness, not for anyone else of course, just for him). It's sort of contradictory to the fact that he's very independent and wants to forge his own path, and also actively rejects influence from other people/countries, but it probably stems from the fact that his biggest desire is to become one with the first (and only for nine years) person he loved, and he's also not good with processing/expressing his affection. So there's this subconscious 'I like this person, I need to become them' urge that occasionally tries to manifest. Weird little guy.

[image]

[image]

More creatures. <3
Dragons groom their comrades to express affection. But to tigers, someone grooming them means they're trying to assert dominance, so misunderstandings can happen easily. However *this* tiger doesn't seem to be putting up as much of a fight as he could be.

I love this specific cat interaction, when one pins another down and grooms them. And if the other cat tries to get away, they just pin them harder. You have claws and a shirataki spine. You could escape if you wanted to, tsundere beast.

The main cast's favourite foods and drinks!

North- Water. Doesn't enjoy food. Even the foods he has good memories of- the rabbit soup Kangwon made him for his first meal, SH's evil soup, Kim Jong-suk's meals- are tainted by South not being with him, or his people going hungry. He eats for nutrition, not flavour, but he does prefer bitter things to sweet. He swears he doesn't like any foods, but he's secretly a little fond of the preserved plum candy China sometimes gives him. And ginseng. It's very obvious he likes ginseng. He has ginseng toothpaste, makes sure SH buys ginseng tea, and chooses to drink those ginseng root bottles to keep Kangwon off his back about health. But he 'doesn't like it.' Korea is slightly more accepting of sweet foods.

North Pyongan- He enjoys all kinds of tea, and has at least a cup a day, but his favourite drink is actually water (he gets teased by South Pyongan for it). He likes any seafood, but especially trout. He also likes songgitteok. Doesn't like alcohol.

Hwang- He likes steamed three-grains and red tea (man of simple tastes). He also likes wine, but they don't have it often.

Chagang- He's a sweet tooth. In the past his favourite food was sweet sesame songpyeon, but with modern conveniences, it's now milk chocolate. His favourite drink is sikhye. But he's sick in the head so he adds sugar. He also likes any modern fruit juice (so sweetened).

Ryanggang- He doesn't like strong flavours of any kind. His

favourite food is boiled potatoes, unseasoned. He also likes potato noodles with shoyu and doenjang. His favourite drink is beer. Doesn't like raw meat dishes, especially not fish.

South Pyongan- Anything with protein, but she especially likes corn. Cobbed corn, fried corn snacks, corn cheese if she gets the chance (which she shouldn't because she's badly lactose intolerant), corn jeon. Her favourite drink is corn juice (North Pyongan teases her for this). She also likes red meat, and doesn't like the texture of organ meats. Not good with spicy foods, but she loves them.

SH- She likes fresh, clear flavours, with cake and coffee biscuits being exceptions. She likes oxtail ginger soup and kasutera. Her favourite drink is actually ice coffee, but she isn't allowed to drink it. North says it's part of him not wanting them to buy more expensive things, but it's actually mostly because SH should NOT have caffeine. She gets... frantic. And controlling. So she's stuck with pear hwachae as her favourite drink-adjacent thing. Doesn't like green tea or chocolate. Will eat fish eyes when she can, more for the memories than taste.

Hae- She loves her strawberry milk and beer. Usually separate. Her favourite food is whatever she's eating at the time, and she'll eat anything put in front of her. But some of her favourites are red meat, blueberry waffles, and braised soybeans.

Kangwon- He prefers natural flavours, and isn't as into modern processed foods. His favourite drink is pine needle tea, and his favourite foods are pine nut porrdige and chongtteok. He likes nuts, especially pine nuts, and berries, as well as ginger and honey. He becomes very fond of Middle Eastern pastries.

North Hamgyong- His favourite drink is soju. He doesn't like green tea or candied fruit. He's also not too fond of sweet food, and leans towards bitter or sour. His favorite dessert is yeot-gangjeong for the nut crunch. His favorite food in general is roast pollock and mustard leaf kimchi. He won't eat dog meat.

China- He doesn't really have favourite foods. He'll eat anything, and he can get anything he wants. He's tried every dish in his country over the years, and he likes them all. So he prioritizes how

a food makes him feel more than how it tastes. Pear, natsume, and goji soup makes him think of his guerrilla days, fruit pirozhki remind him of CCCP, red-braised pork belly brings fond memories of Mao Zedong, and dog soup and apple wine bring back good memories with North (the first one makes sense if you read Chasing Liberty, the second one will make sense eventually. Like *really* eventually. I think we need to accept we're going over 400 chapters, comrades). He's also fond of preserved plum candy. But I think if he could only eat one thing forever, it would be white rice with shoyu.

Krim- Choco milk and салат оливье with as much kolbasa as possible in it. For awhile it was the one thing Russia could reliably make well.

Russia- For all the vodka he drinks, his favourite drink is actually kefir, and his favorite food is medovik. CCCP used to make both of them at home. Sometimes when he's drunk he'll let Krim eat straight out of a can of condensed milk with him. Father-daughter bonding.

Ukraina- She likes sayany and caviar, and more sour or herbal flavours. She tends to have expensive tastes.

Canada- His favourite drink is milk and his favourite food is pancakes with syrup. He's really defensive about both these facts, so he'll usually tell people he likes pizza and ginger ale. America knows the truth and teases him mercilessly about it. 'Hey guys, guess what Canada's favourite food is? Yeah, fucking pancakes and maple syrup!' And then everyone in the club laughs and Canada sinks into the floor. He also likes maple syrup on snow.

South- His favourite drink is watermelon juice, and for foods he likes bulgogi and bungoppang. He prefers sweet and spicy flavours, and doesn't like bitter or sour as much. Because he used to be an alcoholic, he only drinks at parties now, and doesn't get drunk, and for a few decades he didn't drink at all (he honestly still shouldn't be). I think he'd also like mint-choco icecream.

America- He would eat anything physically, but mentally he's racist and will reject foreign foods he thinks are weird. He likes fried, greasy, sugary foods, and his favourite tends to be whatever he

wants at the moment. Some constants are barbeque and classic apple pie. And hamburgers. If Canada was bold enough, he could point out that his brother is throwing stones inside a glass house when it comes to stereotypical foods. But he's not. His favourite drink is Old Forester whisky.

Nipponia- She tends to eat very flavourful, elaborate things when she's out, like sakuramochi or those psychotic cream cheese buns with an entire block of sugary cream cheese in them. Cute things or trending things, too. But she eats more plainly at home, like simple noodle or rice dishes. Her favourite food is jelly. Not any jelly in specific. Boba pearls, fruit jelly, shirataki, any type of yokan, jellyfish. She doesn't cook, so when she's at home, she pretty much eats only jelly. She always has a jelly pouch on her desk when she's drawing. She usually doesn't like eating things that aren't at least a little fused with Japanese food, but holodets is one of the meals CCCP makes that needs no tweaking. Her favourite drink (assuming pouch jelly isn't classified as a drink) is Pocari Sweat.

UIP- He likes denser, heavier flavours, and syrups. His favourite food is stuffed eggplant, with knafeh as a close second. For his favourite drink, cardamom coffee. He also likes herbal teas.

CCCP- He's very multicultural, so he'll also eat almost anything. He makes lots of fusion foods for his children (very hard to keep that many people happy with your food choices), and is the reason most of them are open to trying anything. I think 'ease of serving' definitely factors into his preferences. Blini are his favourite because they're easy to make in large batches and can be customized by each child. I think borsch is also up there. For favourite drink, kefir.

I like oden. But sometimes it feels like I'm making Mystery Soup of Beige Shapes.

MaPhilIndo + Biology

[image] [image] [image]

[image]

I said I'd draw them at some point. ^^ Not a pairing, they're just friends.

[image]

Indonesia's one wing. He was in an abusive nonconsensual relationship with Netherlands at one point, and he cut it off to 'keep a part of his jewel of the Indies' with him when he went home. Rumour says he still has it. Rumour says he's also single-handedly the reason Indonesia is homophobic (it's not internalized homophobia, he's straight).
Also to be clear, this isn't a 'gay man evil' moment, it's very common for all colonizers to exploit their colonies like that. France- current and past, so male and female- with some of the closer African colonies, Spain with many of the female South American ones back then, along with others, Rome, obviously. They have gotten away with it because their victims have dissolved or reconstituted due to their pressures or rebellions against their colonial governments, or because they can pretend it was so long ago and they were different people when they were empires (they weren't). America gets away with it because he knows Japan won't speak up, and he's convinced her that she wants it. France didn't go to Africa, her and others summoned their colonies to them, but Spain and Netherlands were adventurous, so they visited directly. That's how the latter met Indonesia and became obsessed with him. Britain never did something like that, but that's because he's not the sort of 'I don't view you as human so I'm going to use you as I please' racist, he's the 'I don't view you as human so I don't want you to touch me with your filthy, lower-class foreign fingers' racist. And also his old ass never left the Isles. Japan also didn't, but it's because he's a god, and gods do not have desires, nor will they deign to dirty themselves by touching a mortal. This does not make them morally superior to the

other empires to be clear. Even if they didn't commit assault themselves, they knew about and oversaw so much of it they might as well have.

Since Indonesia has a wing, I'll talk about how special features (wings, tails, Philippines' weird fleshy eye part) work here. It's rare for Countryhumans to have them, and even rarer when they're not on their flag, or a version of it. Poland has wings, but it's not super rare because there's a Polish flag version with the eagle crest, but Indonesia's are very rare because while there's an eagle on his crest, it isn't on his flag. Nipponia's ears and tail are ultimately rare because she doesn't have a cat on either, along with Romania, and Kazakhstan's wings technically are also, since he was formed with them before there was an eagle on his flag. In this universe the eagle was chosen *because* he had wings. They can all move their features, but none of them can fly.

Features like Philippines' weird eye and Namibia's floating sun are unique. They're currently the only countries alive with them. (I'm actually indecisive on Namibia's sun, since it's sort of magical and I'm not sure I like that with how the rest of their biology is rooted in reality; I *really* like it with her design, but if you ever see me retcon it as a headdress, shhhh) Philippines is also currently the only country with a non-white eye. In the past, coloured eyes and animal parts were more common, back when a lot of nations had flags with just anything slapped on them, especially European countries with all their animal motifs. Fangs and sharp teeth don't seem to have any reason for showing up, some countries just have them.

Provinces and other subdivisions never have special features, even if they're on their flag. If I don't retcon Namibia's sun, China likes to compare it to Taiwan's, and point out that his is just a flat marking on his face, proving he's just a province.

Attitudes on the parts vary. Mongolia likes their horns, but doesn't like how they have to sleep sitting up. Mexico likes his wings, but would like to sleep on something other than his stomach. Kazakhstan has very large wings, so sometimes finds taking care of them difficult (CCCP used to do it for him; it's much harder to preen them yourself), but he does think they're cool. Romania wishes he

got anything other than bat wings c'mon man, really? Like Dracula?? America secretly wishes he had bald eagle wings. China would *really* like to have special features. He would salivate over those designs where people give him a dragon tail and horns. He knows logically they would have made disguising himself and taking on different roles almost impossible, but that doesn't stop him from dreaming. He'd like fangs too, though he wouldn't take those if given the choice, since they'd make him look more menacing, which isn't good for his mask. North is torn on his fangs. He likes that they've made him appear more dangerous in the past, and been useful in other ways when protecting South from Japan and their other jailors, and with enemies during the wars, but he's also slightly resentful of them. He feels like as a more animalistic feature, they let countries like Japan and America paint him as savage or violent more easily, and reinforce that view to other countries. When he's speaking out against the sanctions at the UN, he feels like an impassioned, righteously angry speech comes off as more aggressive and threatening when the person giving it is baring fangs (he's glad he doesn't have all sharp teeth like Serbia). He also thinks they make him scarier to children. If you gave him the chance to get rid of them, I don't think he'd take it, because he'll choose utility over perception every time, but he definitely considers them an ugly feature (unaware that the general consensus amongst his people and comrades is either that they're cool or attractive). South uses the fact that his brother was formed with fangs to alow himself to pretend he's just a naturally violent person and always has been.

Missing his wing really bothers Indonesia, and he sometimes thinks about just cutting the other one off, too, to get rid of that symbol of what was done to him. But he always stops himself. He doesn't want to let Netherlands take anything else from him.

[image]

I saw this on pinterest and thought it was very Ryanggang.

(Some) Chinese Provinces

[image] [image] [image] [image]

[image]

Sichuan! I tried to dress her like a Chinese lesbian (because she is one), and she has some little Qiang-inspired details, like the belt. All of China's provinces represent a few ethnicities to promote ethnic unity, so if you're Qiang, no matter where you are, you could either go to the province you're living in if you're having an issue, or contact Sichuan. She's an influencer (short films means douyin). I wish I could draw Chinese patterns better, but they're so pretty and intricate.

[image]

Guangdong! There's a stereotype that Guangdong people don't know how to dress, so I like the idea that he also gives that impression, until you see him in his Teochew performing outfit.

[image]

Yunnan! Lots of Yi influence. The bracelet on her left arm is a medicine pouch.

[image]

The first three were requested (I hope you like them ^^), but here's a bonus Liaoning. I redid her, Liaoxi, and Liaotung's art and replaced the old ones with them, so if you want to see the new art of the other two, check the Liaoxi and Liaotung chapter.

All the provinces are trained in a lot of arts (because China is obsessed with them), but the ones listed are their main ones. Liaoning is more of a poet than a dancer, but she still does errenzhuan with Jilin. Yunnan's main art is traditional medicine, but China insists it's worthless, so she has embroidery, too. Yet he doesn't actually seem to mind that medicine is still her main art in

practice. The provinces also all have cute nicknames that China alone calls them. The first ones are what the other Provincehumans might use (Liao) while he uses the second one (Xiao Liao). In universe, the province names on their faces would be done in China's handwriting.

He's a little more lax than North- his provinces are allowed to be a little unprofessional so long as they keep it quiet. As in they aren't expected to act as upright as human Communist Party members- they're allowed to party and have relationships (but no drugs or it will not end well for them). Some of them do act it, but most actually remain upright at their cores, and disapprove that he gave them that allowance in the 90s, and that he engages in 'unprofessional activities' (the sleeping around). For example, Sichuan is fairly openly lesbian- she's involved in the scene, has lots of lesbian friends, and does nothing to hide the very gay aura she gives off- she's just never said it directly. She also wouldn't be opposed to having a girlfriend, but she refuses to sleep around. It's not behaviour befitting a Party official.

I had a dream a few nights ago that I was fighting Donald Trump in a Genshin style battle. He had a health bar. And a lot of HP. He was also spinning around like he was a martial artist in an old movie. I was winning, but it was looking to be a battle of attrition before I woke up. I know I would have won.

Like Father Like...

[image] [image] [image] [image]

POV You're a halmeoni that just called them handsome young men.

POV You're someone that is about to receive criticism so vicious you will wish you were dead

I like to think North has a matching expression with each of his northern provinces. SH is the death glare, Kangwon is flusterment, South Pyongan is the 'I'm enjoying this' baring of teeth that is not quite a smile, North Hamgyong is the little lip curl of disdain, Hae is the rarely seen pout, North Pyongan is the small fond smile, Hwang is the smug look, Ryanggang is the crushing weight of sorrow reflecting in his eyes and deep exhaustion dragging down the lines of his face, and Chagang is the deadpan stare. He also still shares microexpressions with the southern provinces. Except him and South Chungcheong are both capable of the exact same disgusted glare that makes you feel like a bug of some sort.

Also bonus Hae

She doesn't like drinks like vodka, wine, or nihonshu(sake), and she's even not the biggest fan of soju, but Hae does like her beer.

I didn't realize HP Lovecraft was racist when I first started reading his works because I didn't read about half-human half-fish people and go 'Oh my god... The consequences of race mixing...' I said 'Oh my god... The consequences of worshiping an ancient incomprehensible fish god...' You know, like a normal person. Much more noticeable when any of his stories involve the Middle East. Unfortunate.

Deng Xiaoping-core

[image] [image]

China calls all of his leaders by embarrassing nicknames, like Xiao Mao or Xiao Zedong (depending on his mood). Deng Xiaoping was Xiao-ping, but said in a way it was clear he wasn't just using his given name. Comrade Xi would be Xiao Xinping. The attitudes towards this have varied, but none have been able to make him stop.

Also another human form of North and South to compare some of their features more closely. South would usually dye his hair and wear contacts (to look as little like North as possible), but I used his natural colour here to better compare (can't use natural skin tone; bleached). They have the same face shape and nose shape, but North's is crooked from being broken, and South has had his break fixed. They both have high cheek bones, but North's are more angular and strong, like his jaw, while South's features are more delicate. North also has a gyoza ear from being beaten by Japan. North's eyes are sharper and more slender, and he has a monolid. If they were human, I'd have South get surgery for double lids, but as Countryhumans he just naturally has them. North also has sparse, stubby eyelashes, while South's are longer, and North has thinner lips. Specifically his upper lip is missing pigment from the edge so it looks even thinner than it is. He has very twisty teeth, too, especially on the bottom, where South's are more even (though not completely straight). They have all these features in their real forms, too, besides the nose and ears, obviously.

I think I made South look too androgynous. I picture him being very pretty, but in a boyish way, like a lot of SK-pop idols. China is the one that could pass as a woman if he wanted to. Though he has a way about him where he comes off as decidedly masculine, unless he doesn't want to. It's because he's an expert actor. I like the idea that North is not conventionally attractive (though in general Countryhumans aren't exactly conventional looking). His jaw is crooked and his cheekbones are warped. He sort of looks like he

had his face slammed into the floor a few dozen times. Because he has. South is objectively the prettier, better-looking brother. This plays a part in his resentment of North, because he places such value in appearances, and he knows people tend to like him for shallow reasons, like him being hot (it doesn't help that he refuses to get close to people since he's afraid if they know who he really is, they'll leave him). So in the earlier years before he worked on his confidence and charisma, it was especially grating to him that people in general were more 'attracted' to North than him. And even in the modern age now that he's part of the propaganda empire and a beloved public figure and idol, and North is a pariah almost exclusively loved by his people, South is still jealous, partially because of that deep-seated insecurity from before, and partially because it isn't enough that almost everyone loves him, he needs *everyone* to. The idea that there are people that find North more attractive than him makes him spiral when he thinks about it too much. He can write North Koreans or South Korean Communists off as liking North and his ideas more because they're 'brainwashed,' but them being attracted to him more infuriates him because he's objectively more attractive, so they should like *him* more, not seeing that the 'attraction' North's people feel for him is different than the attraction South's feel for him. And deep down he knows that the people that are more attracted to his brother tend to be so more deeper reasons, whereas for South it's mostly just his appearance and stage persona (which, once again, he does nothing to change). But the capitalist viewpoint is something he's internalized deeply, and he definitely views himself as a product. He markets and sells himself, and since he's objectively the more alluring product, no one else should buy the competing brand. I think a large amount of the propaganda that gets sent over the DMZ is just videos of him singing at concerts because the idea of one of North's people watching it and falling in love with him, thinking he's just so perfect and such a beautiful singer that they need to run away from North to him makes him very smug.

This makes it sound like South thinks North is ugly, but he doesn't exactly. He just knows he's less appealing physically than him. No matter what North looked like, he could never see him as ugly because that's the face he yearns to see more than anything, just like North could never think that about him. That's his brother. It's

just that his brother is way less hotter than him and how could you ever think he wasn't??

North on the other hand does not give a damn what he looks like, so long as he's presentable. He's aware South is better-looking than him, and would also be offended on his brother's behalf if you told him you thought he wasn't. Neither of them could believe someone genuinely thought that. I feel like he would describe himself as ugly, but completely apathetically. He really does not care.

I think there are far more people that would describe South as attractive then North, but the people that do find North attractive think he's beautiful. He also returns this favour because he has no perception of ugly or pretty when it comes to the people he loves. All his enemies are hideous, and all his people are beautiful.

China is incredibly sexy and is fully aware of it. Intolerable.

I have said before that I prefer Countryhuman creature form. Another reason they couldn't be human is because if they had hair, China would spend up until the 90s with a short military cut, then grow it out long enough to keep in a ponytail once he cut contact with North. So their reunion wouldn't be very bittersweet and emotional the way I've written it (you'll see the chapters someday), but like this:

China: Long time no-
North: Cut your hair. You look like a woman.

Also China wouldn't have a scalp since North would be too tempted to yank on the tail. China brake-checks him on the stairs and he grabs him by it and wrenches him down them without hesitation.

Late 4th Of July!!

[image] [image] [image]

You THOUGHT. HAPPY DAY OF VICTORY TO THE DPRK!! 조선민주주의인민공화국만세! POV You're the most powerful, wealthy country in the world and you couldn't beat a bunch of fresh outta feudalism peasants because you're a LOSER and Korea and China are just THAT GOOD. And were fighting for freedom and a better future instead of a bunch of rich men's wallets. URA!

The China version got flagged TWICE (but not the CCCP one for some reason) so I had to annoyingly censor it. Boooo.

Two versions, inspired by this.

'However, if the US imperialists, oblivious of the lesson of history, are tenacious enough to provoke a new war of aggression in Korea, turning a deaf ear to the just demand of the Korean people and going against the current of the times, they will eventually perish in the flames of war once and for all, suffering a still greater, miserable defeat than they suffered in the past Korean war.'

Wailing: I want to go baaaaaaack

This is all today. Author has writing to do. Inspired.

Serbia +

[image] [image]
[image] [image]

As promised, his design. This face is specifically the one he makes when China says 'Come along, my concubines' to him and Russia at UN meetings. (Russia's response is 'I am the favourite concubine.') I had fun with his crown, but he's one of the ones where I can't capture the manliness of him accurately. So please use your imagination to imagine him as 10% more masculine. Red lily of the valleys on his cuffs and shirt (lilies are white but shh I wanted the accent colour) and ramonda on his sash.
He's usually fairly sarcastic and irascible, but he does have a warmer, more energetic side. You're just not seeing it if you're not close with him. He's the type that can get along well with Russia, but has less tolernace for his... general being than someone like China. Also less tolernace for China's general being. Sharp teeth.

Him without all the accessories. I think maybe his eye was cut out by Bosnia as revenge for what Bosnian Serbs did during the Bosnian War. Serbia himself wasn't involved in it, it was more 'These are your people, you're going to pay for it.'

And some requests.

CCCP teaching Hawaii and Michigan about Communism. They're confused because they're American, so they don't know how to do math (she said boldly, also not knowing how to do math). And also because they're a bit... distracted. The yellow hibiscus on Hawaii are fake because apparently the real flower is very endangered. Her lei is made of all the flowers that represent her islands (and shells).

East and West Flanders beating up America while Belgium watches. First and only person to draw this in the Countryhumans fandom, I think.

I love writing I love exercising I love my friends and readers I love my characters I love the world author is full of love today. I'm upset

that over two dozen people were killed by the earthquake (that have been found), but it always fills me with love for humanity to see rescue efforts with everyone coming together. <3

Joseon And Ming

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Joseon! Not his ceremonial outfit, but his everyday attire. Though he was wealthy enough to have more robes than days in a year. All of his clothes are expensive and made of quality materials, but he's a little more Confucian and doesn't dress too flashily.

Ming! Peonies on his helmet whiskers, twelve dragons on his robe. I was thinking about doing six strings on each side with twelve beads on each, like on the ceremonial crown, but it looked clunky. So those are less for casual wear. He is a very flashy dresser.
Most Chinas have been emperor yellow, and have had some sort of dragon feature. Rumour has it the first China was almost fully one. But Ming's feature isn't as noticeable.

He only has glowing eyes. (the eyes on the dragon crown are night pearls, which is why they glow) To outdo Ming, the Qing Dynasty officials put the long on their flag, hoping the personification that formed would have more long features. He did- Qing had horns and claws. Joseon said he was overcompensating and Ming didn't have to have overt features to be a dragon.
What dragon feature does modern day China have? Who knows... It's not so much a visible quality.

Ming gradually got more and more decadent towards the end of his life, until during the famines of the 1630s, a concubine from Jiangnan assassinated him. She poisoned him and cut his brain out. He was in a coma for two years as the dynasty crumbled, and had only just woke up when Qing executed him. Joseon became decadent more slowly, peaking when he went on to become the Korean Empire as Korea declined. He was executed by Japan, dissolved so he could have a Korea with less pride and years. Did not work out so well for him.

Joseon and Ming in the 1500s. Joseon didn't have an official flag then, so I made him the azure of the Korean dragon and kirin with the Peninsula on his face. Ming doesn't have claws, it's just that old

aristocrat thing of having long nails to show you don't need to do labour (andalsotolookmoredragony).

If you know anything about Joseon/Ming relations, it makes sense to have them be in a relationship, or at least to have Joseon have feelings for him. But it's not a typical one. Joseon loved Ming, but for someone as old as him, wealthy, powerful, and almost godlike, his love is sort of skewed. He was also in love with the old Gyeonggi (and more with her than Ming; a country can't love another more than his own), had dozens of concubines, and also had sexual relationships with all his female provinces, and could be considered to have affection for several of them. As an example of what sort of people they were and what their relationship was like, some of his tribute gifts to his lover were Korean women, essentially handing them over into sexual slavery to him, usually against their will. Ming would also give him women selected from among his concubines.
Ming meanwhile did not love Joseon. His ability to love was pretty much ground down over the years. He was jaded. He only thought of sexual and intimate relations in terms of political value. He wasn't above using his body as currency, and slept with most of his tributaries (which Joseon was aware of) to keep them content. He gave in to being the sort of powerful person who just does whatever they want much quicker than Joseon, who maintained higher Confucian values than him. He had far less concubines, and unlike Ming never slept with men. But eventually he was like 'Why not?' and gave in to his advances, deciding he could get more out of him in exchange (unlike certain decsendents, Joseon had no shame in milking Ming for whatever he could get, bringing him extravagant tribute gifts frequently so Ming would be forced to give back even more expensive ones or lose face, to the point Ming restricted the amount of times he could give tribute). Ming did bear him great affection, and liked being around him. Countries didn't really have 'friends' back then, but he was frequently his favourite tribute state. But he didn't love him. It's like Joseon's love was too diffused to be real love, and Ming did not love at all. But they were very fond of each other, and resentment over his loss played a big part in Joseon's attitude of 'Go die go die go die' towards Qing. 'You aren't good enough to be China, you aren't him. You didn't even share his values, *I'm* the rightful successor of his legacy.'

But as much as Joseon loved Ming, he also resented him a little for making him bow when he took him as tribute. As intimate as they were, there was always the knowledge that they weren't on even footing hanging over him. In bed, Joseon could pretend they were equal. But they never stopped being an empire and its vassal state.

Now Korea and China are besties. Even if a bit of that resentment lives on in a different form.

Centuries ago:
Joseon: Ming~♥ ^^
Ming: This guy...

Modern day:
China: Chaoxian~ ^^
North: This guy...

Joseon would be so proud. Ming would not be. Neither North nor China would ever particularly care what they thought.

Tae-min And Han-jin

Finally... The full backstory... The clues are all in Chasing Liberty, but I get to write them out now. Also if you haven't read Chasing Liberty this will be a little out of context. A lot out of context. If you are reading Chasing Liberty and you're *really* not caught up or want a refresher, you can read to or look back on chapter Good Neighbours to chapter Forgive Me My Sins in part 1 to understand.

So we have: **Oh Tae-min,** 17, landlord's son
Hyun Han-jin, 17, peasant boy working the Oh family land
Oh Kyung-tae, landlord and Tae-min's father
Jin-ho, Hyun Han-jin's father, a peasant renting Oh Kyung-tae's land
Kim Kang-sim, 18, son of the most prominent landlord in the area
Kim Ju-sim, most prominent landlord in the area
Ahn Chun-hui, 16, Han-jin's cousin (his mother and her mother are sisters)

They all live in or around Onsu-ri on Ganghwa Island (real place, hello Onsu-ri)

Han-jin is a couple months older than Tae-min. He's had a few younger siblings, but they all died young. Tae-min's birth was really rough and left his mother weak, and Oh Kyung-tae was actually in love with her, so he didn't force her to have more children or take a concubine. It might have been different if they'd had a girl child, but even then he would have consulted her first, and would have rather taken a concubine so that she wouldn't be at risk, and could have an extra pair of hands to help raise Tae-min. So he's an only child. His mother died of an illness in 1948. She had never fully recovered from his birth, and the stress of Rhee's police paying 'friendly' visits over her and Oh Kyung-tae's vocal dislike of the American occupation and the plans to declare the Republic of Korea made her worse. Kim Kang-sim had two older brothers, but they died fighting in the Japanese Army, and his mother died soon after

he was born. For all his flaws, his father really did love him and his mother, enough so that he never remarried after her death, even when he lost two of his heirs. But he was very much a single Korean father in the 30s/40s. Which is to say he wasn't exactly the most lov*ing*. He was the type to smack him if he used banmal with him. Chun-hui is an only child because her mother could just never seem to get pregnant again.

Oh Kyung-tae was a genuinely good person, despite being a landlord. He 'inherited' Han-jin's family from his father, along with two other families, and actually treated them well. Him and Han-jin's dad had been friends growing up, despite his parents' disapproval, and he made it clear he wasn't ever going to evict them if the harvest fell short and they couldn't get the rent in. He also worked his own land, and was blessed with fertile soil. Onsu-ri was a small place, so the main landlords were really him and Kang Ju-sim, who owned much more land and was prone to running people out of town over rent (Onsu-ri is real, but this is all fictionalized). They were both anti-Japanese, but Kang Ju-sim was against them for more personal reasons because of the conscription of his sons and having to pay taxes to them. Kang Ju-sim also had it out for Oh Kyung-tae, as he refused to sell his land no matter how much he offered. He is very much the quintessential landlord.

From a young age, Han-jin and Tae-min were very close. Their parents were basically shared, and Oh Kyung-tae would even invite them to eat at his table, despite the difference in their stations. He even paid for Han-jin to go to school, which was pretty much unheard of for peasant children in Korea. Tae-min was born weak and was a sickly child, and it was already clear that he wasn't the most outgoing person. So when they were around five, Han-jin's father told Han-jin it was his responsibility to protect him to pay back all Oh Kyung-tae had done for them. This, along with losing younger siblings over the years, definitely didn't give Han-jin a complex. As they grew up, it was very clear that Tae-min wasn't exactly 'masculine.' He was quiet, introverted, and would rather read than do farmwork. Meanwhile Han-jin was the definition of the strapping peasant boy. He would do Tae-min's chores for him, even when he protested, and fight off the boys that tried to bully him (Kim Kang-sim and his gang most of all). But this would just

make the bullying worse since Tae-min couldn't fight his own battles. This bred a bit of resentment in him, not against Han-jin, but more himself for being weak, which eventually presented as him pulling away from him.

I think for their love for each other, it was a Tae-min fell first, Han-jin fell harder, then Tae-min fell hardest situation. Han-jin was definitely in love with Tae-min from a young age. I think he sort of vaguely knew it, but it wasn't until he got old enough to be attracted to girls that he realized 'Oh, okay, I'm attracted to Tae-min in the same way.' (bisexual) He had a couple girlfriends (in the 1940s feudal Korea sense), but they never hung out for long because he realized he didn't love them the same way he loved Tae-min, and even if he could, he didn't want to. He was completely devoted to Tae-min to the point that villagers would see Tae-min without him and jokingly ask where his peasant boy was. Ahn Chun-hui spent a lot of time with them when they were little, but when it came less appropriate for a girl to go traipsing around with boys, even her cousin, it was mostly just Tae-min and Han-jin. Han-jin was definitely ashamed of being attracted to men (Onsu-ri was a small religious town), but not really of being in love with Tae-min. That's his best friend, how could he be ashamed?

Tae-min probably had a crush on Han-jin since he was around five, though he wasn't able to identify that's what it was. He was this slightly older boy that always wanted to hang out with him, and was super adventurous and cool, so how couldn't he like him? He eventually became aware that Han-jin felt that way about him, and it did shame him. He had basically known for awhile, but was denying his own feelings, and had the hope of 'he'll grow out of this (and so will I).' But when they became young adolescents, around 14, and Han-jin started spending time with girls he had this feeling of 'Oh God, what if he grows out of this?' It was also around this time that his father and mother started considering the idea of marrying him to Chun-hui eventually (her family weren't peasants, her father was a cobbler). Chun-hui was fine with his, as while she only saw Tae-min as a friend, at least she knew and liked him, and knew he was a good person, which is really as much as you could hope for back then. And while Tae-min should have felt the same, he realized the idea filled him with panic instead. The discussion

was semi-shelved after his mother died, but there was an expectation that it would happen one day. That was when he had to admit that he didn't have any interest in women, and he did in Han-jin. He wasn't disgusted by Han-jin liking him back, he was more ashamed because he felt like he wasn't worthy of it. 'Your feelings are already unnatural, why would you risk having them for me?' But he *was* disgusted with himself. His whole life he'd been facing little comments about how Oh Kyung-tae's boy wasn't exactly the pinnacle of manhood, and more direct 'sissy' comments from Kang-sim and company, so it really felt like that confirmation of 'They were right. I'm not a real man.'

This made him resent himself for relying on Han-jin so much even more, so when Kim Kang-sim suddenly started saying he should spend time with him and his gang, Tae-min did, even though they'd often bullied him, and they were still very much treating him in a 'go buy yakisoba pan for us with your own money' way. I feel like Kang-sim started doing this because of how much his father complained about Oh Kyung-tae. With his older brothers gone, he had suddenly been thrust into the position of heir, and had the responsibility of it placed on him. He was always a delinquent child, even when he was young, getting other kids in trouble with the Japanese, then using his status and father's money to escape the consequences. And now the family's future was on him. He didn't really have a head for landlording, and had no idea what he could do to get Oh Kyung-tae's land for his father, so he went the delinquent path and decided to start corrupting his son. Even if that didn't work, maybe treating him like a lackey would make his father proud. For Tae-min it was this group of masculine boys that had always looked down on him deciding he was cool enough to hang out with them, and it was a chance to not rely on Han-jin so much anymore.

Han-jin kept following him for awhile, trying to keep him safe and get him to ditch them. He saw the trouble Kang-sim was getting him into and was like 'You know your dad, you know he won't bail you out if you get in real trouble, he'll want you to learn your lesson. And they'll leave you to take the fall.' And he didn't like the way they were treating him. Eventually he fully confronted Tae-min and told him he didn't think they had good intentions, and Tae-min

accused him of being jealous. This was as close as he'd came to ever acknowledging Han-jin's feelings for him, and so he panicked and lashed out, saying that he was jealous he didn't need him anymore, and that he had friends that were actually in his social class. Han-jin was hurt, but he also knew Tae-min, so wasn't going to let it deter him. He told him he needed him to protect him, and that it was his job, and Tae-min snapped and told him he didn't need or want him to protect him and that he was done with him. It was really the implication that Han-jin only spent time with him because he saw it as his obligation to protect the weak little boy of the landlord he and his father owed a debt to, and not because he was his friend which made him do it. Which isn't true, but he'd been repressing his feelings for so long that he couldn't see that. Han-jin was upset, and decided that if Tae-min didn't want him to protect him, then there was nothing he could do. Then he moped for almost half a year.

Oh Kyung-tae was preoccupied with grieving his wife and dealing with Rhee's police and accusations of being a leftist, and since Tae-min was pretty much like 'don't tell me what to do' when he brought up him spending time with unsavoury characters, he just sighed and accepted he'd learn his lesson (not knowing what was coming). Han-jin's mom didn't say anything to him because she knew it would just drive him away, but she made sure to show up for Tae-min when it came to meals and clothes, since she knew he had to be missing his own mom, and she told Han-jin she was sure he would come back around. Han-jin's dad told him you can't help someone that doesn't want to be helped, and to just be there for him if Tae-min ever decided he did. This did not help the moping.

Meanwhile, Tae-min was still spending time with Kang-sim and the others, and started developing a crush on him. He was still ashamed, but he sort of threw himself into it to try and block out his feelings for Han-jin. 'At least if I have to have these screwed up feelings, I won't have them for *him.'* And maybe part of him was conscious of the way he was being treated and was telling him he deserved it. Though Kang-sim had started treating him nicer, and they'd started hanging out alone, and actually sort of bonding. One night when they were together, Tae-min asked about his mom. Kang-sim had literally never been asked about her before, but he

hesitantly told him what he remembered about her, and what his brothers had told him. And that he felt like his father blamed him for her death sometimes, even though the sickness hadn't had anything to do with him, just because he was the last child and it happened soon after he was born. Tae-min was quiet, then told him he sort of felt the same way sometimes, since it was his birth that had weakened his mother for the rest of her life, something he hadn't even told Han-jin since he didn't want him to have another reason to see him as weak. Kang-sim told him he didn't think it was either of their fault's, and they had a very weighty moment where they were sitting very close together and he was looking at Tae-min's face. This and a few other things from previous days made Tae-min think he wasn't wrong in thinking that Kang-sim liked him back, and his emotions got the better of him. He kissed him. In a *shocking* turn of events, Kang-sim pushed him away and slugged him across the face, calling him a freak and saying he'd known he was a sissy before telling him to stay the fuck away from him and storming off.

Tae-min was heartbroken and terrified, and too ashamed to tell Han-jin or anyone else. But soon after that, Kang-sim's gang caught him and beat the shit out of him. When Han-jin noticed he was hurt, he tried to ask what happened, but Tae-min was embarrassed and told him it was none of his business. Then they caught him again, and beat him even worse before they were interrupted by Han-jin cutting in and beating them back (he'd been following him to make sure he was okay). Kim Kang-sim told Tae-min he was a freak and he was going to kill him, then they left. Badly injured and terrified, Tae-min was forced to tell Han-jin, 'Hyung, I need you.' He told him about what had happened, having to confess he liked men. Han-jin was hurt and definitely thinking 'Ouch, okay. Like the guy that bullied you, but not your best friend.' But out loud he just told him it was okay, and that it wasn't his fault, and he would protect him. Even knowing how Han-jin felt about him, Tae-min was still convinced he would call him a disgusting freak and abandon him. But even the good reaction didn't make him feel better. He was just more shamed that he really couldn't defend himself, that he'd had to come crawling back to him, and that Han-jin was still ready to protect him after he had been a jerk to him.

For the next half a year, Kim Kang-sim and his goons would target Tae-min, and Han-jin would beat them up. He got in trouble for it multiple times, to the point that if they'd been in a big city, he probably would have been arrested. But since it was a fairly insular community, it was mostly just a slap on the wrist and a 'Cut that out.' Meanwhile the other boys' parents just easily made it go away for them. Around this time, Kang-sim also really started harassing Chun-hui. He'd always seemed to have a sort of puppy crush on her, but he started acting on it like a man. Forcing her to let him walk her home, trying to make her go places with him, making 'comments.' So Chun-hui started staying home. If she did leave, it was with Han-jin and Tae-min. It was a small village, so everyone was sort of aware of what was going on, even if they didn't know the specifics. Most people weren't exactly fans of Kim Ju-sim and his son, while they did like Oh Kyung-tae and Han-jin's family, so they definitely placed the blame on Kang-sim. 'I saw the Hyun boy wallopin' Kang-sim again.' 'Tsk, that Kim better start using a belt on his son, or he'll grow up to be real trouble.' But no one really stepped in because they were afraid of Kim Ju-sim. Things were weird between Tae-min and Han-jin at this point. While Han-jin would be glad to go back to how things were, Tae-min was still wrapped in resentment and shame, and fear, both that Kang-sim would kill him or worse- tell people he's abnormal. Onsu-ri was the kind of place where everyone knew everyone, and were in each other's business. It wasn't exactly a secret that Oh Kyung-tae's boy wasn't entirely... adequate. There were whispers, always in that vague language. But it was still the sort of thing where if it was made public for certain, everyone would still react with disgust and shock, and it would ruin Tae-min's family name. And he was afraid too that his feelings for Han-jin haven't gone away. Han-jin never left his side unless it was to sleep, but when they were together, it was tense, and he was the one doing most of the talking. Kang-sim's attacks were also becoming more frequent and brutal as his rage and own shame at being beaten by Han-jin built. Kim Ju-sim's reaction to all this was basically 'People have been talking. They say the peasant boy beat you in a fight. Don't let it happen again,' which humiliated him. Oh Kyung-tae and Han-jin's parents were worried, but Oh told them not to get involved to avoid turning Kim Ju-sim on them. He tried to talk to the man, but he was basically like 'Boys will be boys. *pointed look* Well, *my* boy is, anyway.'

There was this sense of things coming to a head.

Then the war formally broke out and the KPA Liberated Ganghwa Island. The People's Committees were reformed, and the Security Company worked with the people of Ganghwa to carry out land reform. Oh Kyung-tae willingly ceded his land to the peasants that worked it, and Kim Ju-sim also lost all of his land except what he could work. Oh was fine with this. He and Han-jin's father actually had a private agreement between them that when Han-jin came of age, Oh Kyung-tae would sell the land his family worked to his dad for cheap. Han-jin's father insisted it was to him, not Han-jin, because he didn't want him to feel indebted forever, and he also insisted on saving up as much as possible for it, as well as pushing Han-jin to take odd jobs all his life. It's a little 'feudal cuck' of him, but he did actually give the money he'd saved to Oh Kyung-tae after the land reform, even when he tried to deny it. He set it aside to give to Han-jin later in life. Kim Ju-sim was *not* fine with this. He saw it as taking the land he owned, even though he didn't work it.

(also tangent but I saw the descendent of a wealthy Korean landlord family say about the DPRK 'they weren't democratic, they stole over 1000 acres from my family!' And... do you think the fact that your family owned a thousand acres that dozens or even over a hundred other people worked on while you stole *their* labour and harvests is democratic...? Moron. Landlords hold people in poverty, then when someone takes that ownership over them away they gripe at no longer being wealthy (not that most of those families didn't go on to be affluent in the South and remain influential until today). But what they're really griping over is having to experience even a *tiny* bit of what the people their families were exploiting did for decades or longer. Then they teach their kids to be spoiled, entitled losers that feel owed something that didn't even belong to their family in the first place)

Anyway, Kim Ju-sim also saw Oh giving away his land as giving away *his* land. He was incensed that he would just throw it away when he had always turned down his money for it. Oh Kyung-tae went to him to tell him to keep his head down. He didn't like the man, but he didn't have a real problem with him. He was like 'Hey, people around here don't exactly like you. They were being really

generous by letting you keep enough land to work yourself. Don't give them an excuse to get rid of you. We have our differences, but I don't want to see your kid lose his father because he couldn't take his eyes off his pockets for once.' This just angered Kim Ju-sim more. But he kept his head down. While Ganghwa peasants were finally able to own their land and were building democracy for the first time, he reigned in Kang-sim and directed him towards some reactionary boys, Northwest Youth League types that had already been killing Communists and 'sympathizers' before the war. Tae-min, Han-jin, and Chun-hui had a little peace, though Kang-sim was always lurking on the periphery.

And then the KPA was driven back in September. The People's Committees were dissolved and the members forced into hiding or murdered, and the land reform was undone. The peasants on Kim Ju-sim's land hadn't gotten rid of their feudal mindset yet, so when he demanded his land back and said they belonged to him again, they let it happen because they felt they had no other choice. Oh Kyung-tae let the families on 'his' land keep it, but Kim Ju-sim swept in with money and threats, and managed to sway one into giving it up to him. This was a very tense period as massacres of Communists and those who protested the reforms being dissolved took place (more information on this in the chapters of Chasing Liberty I mentioned at the beginning). The Ganghwa Commandos formed in force and took over the brewery on Onsu-ri, executing dissenters, with Kim Kang-sim in their ranks. Tae-min and Han-jin were terrified, and their families were both on edge. Kim Ju-sim's threats were growing more severe, and if Oh hadn't been so popular, he likely would have been removed in the first month. The other peasant family he'd given his land to disappeared, fleeing from any repercussions for accepting the land they had worked all their lives as theirs. When the KPA came back to Liberate the mainland Kimpo area again, many of Rhee's police and soldiers fled the island, as they had in June and July of 1950. And this time, they took Han-jin's father as a conscript. He had made sure the boys weren't in the village at the time, but when the reactionary forces saw a hale peasant man the KPA could use if they didn't, they took him. This was at the beginning of January. Now Han-jin's land was held by only him and his mother. Kim Kang-sim had been growing more overt in his threats, and while he was nowhere near the leader

of the Commandos, he was a key one in Onsu-ri because of his status. Han-jin and Tae-min rarely left their homes, and neither did Chun-hui.

On the 7th, her parents went to church, leaving her home. And Kim Kang-sim showed up at her door. He forced his way inside and told her her mother was under investigation for being related to Han-jin's, who was being considered a leftist for still claiming the land she had been given. He threatened her with her parents being taken away if she didn't sleep with him. And because she was terrified, she did. She didn't tell her parents because she was worried they would try and do something about it and get killed. She only confessed at church, and told Han-jin and Tae-min, who realized it was a terrifying sign that Kang-sim was getting comfortable with power. A few days after that, they accidentally stayed out late in town. They were both scared, and ended up being more vulnerable with each other. Tae-min told Han-jin he should just take Chun-hui and leave, since Kim Ju-sim and Kang-sim didn't really have a problem with him, just the fact that he was on the land they wanted (which isn't exactly true, he wanted to get him for the beatings). Han-jin told him he would never leave him, and that he was going to protect him no matter what. Tae-min asked why he would want to protect him when he's a freak, and Han-jin told him he'd never thought he was a freak and never would, and he knew why. They had a very intimate moment where they were leaning in, then Tae-min freaked out, remembering what had happened before, and said they should go. On their way back to their houses, they saw Kang-sim and three of his gang leaving. Han-jin realized what Tae-min didn't, and told him to run check his house while he followed them. He tailed them into the west woods and saw that he'd been right- they had Oh Kyung-tae with him. He was going to jump out and try to save him, even though the Commandos had guns. But the man saw him and gave him a look, silently telling him to go take care of Tae-min. And after a moment, Han-jin did. He told him what happened, and Tae-min freaked out and started hitting him, telling him he should have saved his dad. But Han-jin said he had to protect him. He was on the verge of tears because that was really his second father, and Tae-min broke down, too. In the days after, everyone knew what had happened to Oh Kyung-tae, even if they didn't know who had done it. He was labelled a Communist, so he

had to disappear. Kim Ju-sim was spreading whispers that Tae-min was probably one, too, but Han-jin defended him. His own dad was a 'totally willing patriot' that had gone to fight for the southern army, so obviously he was a patriot, too, along with his best friend. A couple days later, they came home, and Han-jin's mother was gone. No signs of a struggle. Just an empty house. Han-jin told Tae-min she had probably just left because she was scared to make him feel better, and he latched on to that to make Han-jin feel better. But they both knew she wouldn't have left them. They were now the only obstacles standing between Kim Ju-sim and their land.

A few very uneasy days passed where they didn't leave each other's sides, or even their properties. Why so many days when Kim Ju-sim was definitely hinting to his son to get rid of them? Who knows... Kim Pan-suk from the village brought them food and tried to look out for them in this time. Neither of them wanted to leave their land, but they started making plans to, either to run into the mountains or try and make it to the KPA-controlled mainland.

This was when North Pyongan, Chagang, Liaoxi, and the KPA squads showed up to Liberate Ganghwa again. The moment the fighting started, Tae-min and Han-jin took off, knowing Kang-sim would be coming for them. And he did, tracking them down and shooting Tae-min in the back of the knee. He likely would have killed both of them if North Pyongan and Liaoxi didn't step in. I won't go into these parts because they're in Chasing Liberty, but the reason Tae-min and Han-jin are so tense at the trial, and the reason he says 'He didn't tell' after the execution is because they were scared that with nothing to lose, Kang-sim would tell everyone that Tae-min was gay. Why didn't he? That's sort of up to you. Did he actually consider Tae-min a friend, the one person he'd ever opened up to? Did he want to spare his own pride by hiding the fact that a man kissed him? Or was he worried that Tae-min would tell everyone that he kissed back? Regardless, he took it to his grave.

Things are okay for just over a week. The cloud has lifted, even if their parents are still gone, and Chun-hui still has to cope with what was done to her. Han-jin moves in with her and her parents, Tae-min is looked after by Kim Pan-suk, and Kim Ju-sim is in jail, set to be re-educated after the war is won (or perhaps executed if it's left

to the locals). But then the KPA soldiers are recalled for the counteroffensive at the front, and the Commandos come down on the villagers again. Han-jin and Tae-min were out in the fields, finally just enjoying being together with the threat of Kang-sim gone, when they hear commotion at their houses. They bunker down, and Kim Pan-suk runs from town to tell them what's going on. As the Commandos round up more people to execute, they stay low for a few days in her cellar. Eventually they get a chance to run, and go for it. But Han-jin couldn't protect his father or his mother or his little siblings or even Tae-min. He has to go back for Chun-hui. He runs away. But when he gets there, all he finds is dry blood and a broken cane. He flees, and doesn't tell Tae-min what he saw. He's seen, and the reactionaries give chase. Then Kim Pan-suk takes off, distracting them, giving the boys a chance to escape. They don't want to, but they have no choice but to run. They hear her get gunned down behind them. As they row away in a fishing boat, they're fired on. Tae-min ducks, but Han-jin keeps rowing, and takes several bullets to his lungs and brachial plexus. A hole is also put in their boat. Tae-min takes over rowing and gets them most of the way across the channel before it sinks, and they have to swim the rest of the way. They're half-dead when they wash up in Kimpo for the KPA to find.

I think this explains why they're so screwed up for the next year. Tae-min feels like he's still useless and needs Han-jin to protect him, and Han-jin feels like he *couldn't* protect Tae-min, or anyone. Tae-min feels like maybe Han-jin could have if he wasn't with him, and maybe Han-jin feels that way, too. But even when he reaches out to him, Tae-min rejects it because he's too traumatized by Kang-sim. He knows Han-jin knows he likes him, and he knows he feels the same, but there's still this terror that if he actually shows his own affection, he'll be rejected again, and he'll lose the one person he has left, and his best friend. And he also feels like he doesn't deserve Han-jin's feelinsg. He sees it all as his fault for not just being normal. He should have died with his father. Maybe he should have died in the womb and spared his mother so she could give birth to an actual man. And Han-jin for once is too broken by everything that happened to make him see that's not true.

Then they lose Ganghwa for real as the KPA retreats back north

again, and they go with them. When they get out of the hospital and North Pyongan gives them the hut to live in, Han-jin still tries to reach out to Tae-min, but he feels too worthless to accept him. He feels like he'd be better off without him, until North Pyongan gives him his 'We're never not good enough for the ones that love us' talk. And their job at the rest house. And Tae-min decides to try and be good enough for the one that loves him, and himself. He throws himself into chores for the first time in his life, and rapidly excels at cooking, sewing, cleaning, all these things that Han-jin had to do before that he's now better at him than. And Han-jin is left feeling like he's good for nothing. The injury left by his damaged brachial plexus means he can't protect Tae-min anymore. He can't even carry him over rough terrain when it's too much for his leg. All he can do is chop wood, and even that's really too much for his body. He can't get a real job to support him, and seeing Tae-min flourishing like this without him makes him feel like he's not needed (never mind that Tae-min would probably just kill himself if he wasn't there). There's this wedge between them at this time, even when they're living together and (awkwardly) sharing the same bed.

It takes South Pyongan being like 'What, you want him to be useless so you can feel useful? Grow up, loser' and exposing how he feels to Tae-min that he comes clean to him about it, and they talk openly and honestly for the first time in their almost nineteen years of friendship. About how Tae-min has always felt inadequate next to him and how he doesn't care if Han-jin couldn't do anything for him- he just doesn't want to feel like he protects him because he *has* to, and how Han-jin was really hurt by him abandoning him for Kang-sim and how he's never felt like looking out for him was a burden. They talk about their parents, too. So after two and a half long years, their friendship is finally repaired fully. The one thing they don't talk about is their other feelings for each other, even though Han-jin tries. Tae-min is still too scared. And he knows it's impossible for them to be together. They're two men. It's wrong. It can't happen. And since it can't happen, there's no point in talking about it and ruining what they have, which he's still convinced would happen.

So even though they're properly friends again and things aren't tense anymore, somehow they're still a bit awkward. They sleep on

far sides of the same bed with their backs to each other, they go to sleep and wke up together, Han-jin takes their dishes to wash and picks up Tae-min's rations when his leg is seized up, Tae-min sews his clothes and makes dinner for him, and an uneasy feeling hangs over these little domestic acts that should just be survival actions. And every time Han-jin tries to breach that wall his friend has put up, it's firmly reinforced. Han-jin is the one that mentions North Pyongan and Liaoxi liking each other out loud to them, but Tae-min was the first to realize, and he'd tried to tell Han-jin not to. He feels like since it's not possible for a Korean province to be with a Chinese soldier, it's just painful to bring it up, even more so when they decide Liao Shī really is Liaoxi. Tae-min sees him and North Pyongan as being in the same position- they both love someone, but it's impossible to be together because of who they are. So seeing that him and Liaoxi really *are* together, that they're choosing to be together even knowing that long-term they can't have a future, breaks him. Seeing them in love makes him think 'That really could be Han-jin and I. We have a chance.' After the Sarang, Sarang chapter where Liaoxi tells him the only love to regret is the love they don't share, he limps back to Han-jin and throws himself into his arms to kiss him, and tell him that he loves him, and that even if they can't have a future together, he wants to love him now. Han-jin almost dies. Don't confess in the middle of summer. Joking but also not really. He is thrilled and more than happy to finally tell Tae-min he likes him too.

For the rest of the war, they live a very domestic life. They live in the hills and only come down to pick up rations and work at the rest house, and the more scattered way life works during war lets them almost pretend that they're together. No one judges them for being too close- they're all each other has left. No one judges them for doing domestic tasks for each other- to survive war, everyone has to pitch in. None of the aunties that take care of them whisper about them being too touchy or Tae-min being too sensitive- they're both crippled, so they need to help each other out, and of course Tae-min's sensitive, his father and everyone else he cared about was murdered. And no one says anything about two men living together when most of the population is living crammed into caves with their extended families and neighbours. North Pyongan doesn't even see anything wrong with them sharing the same straw mat bed

because winters get cold and their shack is small (he has also probably never even considered the idea of a gay person before in his life).

But eventually the war ends, and the confines of society start closing in again. Korea remains Divided, and Ganghwa remains below that Dividing line. Tae-min and Han-jin can never go home. North Pyongan moves them to Sinuiju so he can look after them, and they share an apartment. While Korea rebuilds, they cling to those moments where they could pretend they had the chance of a future together, getting a little taste of normalcy as things come back together again. They make it until the 60s, when the DPRK is settled enough, the economy shooting back up, that two unrelated men living together starts to get looks again. Being gay has always been legal in the DPRK, but it's not exactly smiled upon in Korean culture. And Tae-min just joined the Worker's Party, so he can't risk rumours. And the housing situation has pretty much recovered from being utterly destroyed, and houses are free from the State, so there's no supply or monetary excuse.

If you want to avoid spoilers for the next chapter I just posted in this book, go read it then come back to finish reading this.

SH backs off on her matchmaking of them with women in the latest CL chapter because Chagang brings up that they'll 'probably want to marry Ganghwa women' (he knows they're in love, he just won't tell) to spare them. But in the 60s, when it's clear they won't be Reunified and get Ganghwa back anytime soon, SH starts going to North Pyongan to ask about criteria for their partners. And since he wants to give them as good a life as possible and encourage them not to try and return to Ganghwa, where they'd still be in danger, he agrees, and gives her traits in women he thinks they'd match well with, not realizing that he's just describing the other man. Tae-min and Han-jin don't really resist when they're introduced. They're both aware that their relationship was always going to be temporary, and that they would have to return to the real world sometime. And they both like Kim Myeong-suk and Pak Hyang-hui as people, and the women both like them, so the weddings move forward. They have a nondescript joint one. DPRK weddings in general are very lowkey, and in the 60s they were really just about

making it legally official in a lot of places. But on the night before the wedding, Tae-min and Han-jin invite North Pyongan over to drink (non-alcoholic for him) and reminisce, and they get him to toast to their happiness and love. He thinks it's for them and their wives, but it's really just for them. He used to be Protestant, and he's a government official, so he's as close to an officiator as they can get. And their relationship comes to an end with them marrying each other.

They spend the rest of their lives together as friends, and go on to live long, mostly happy ones, raising their children jointly, the way their families once raised them, and eventually they die of natural causes, one soon after the other. And North Pyongan holds on to their bones so that one day, when Korea is Reunified, they can go home and be buried together on Ganghwa Island like he promised.

Some little side notes- I think Kim Kang-sim *was* gay. I think his 'crush' on Chun-hui in the beginning was more that thing young boys do where they target quiet girls with things they know make them uncomfortable, sort of testing how much control they can have over a girl without realizing that's what they're doing. That's actually what boys are doing when older people say 'Aw, he's teasing you because he likes you.' No, he's only ever seen women interacted with in a proprietary, cruel manner, so now he's subconsciously testing his limits. And if he receives positive feedback because you've been gaslit into thinking he likes you, he will grow up to internalize that. When a boy did that to me when I was young, I bit him on the arm so hard he bled. I bet he treats women well now. Have I ever said I hate what men let the patriarchy turn them into? Anyway. Like he *thought* he liked her, but it was more mirroring the way he'd seen adult men interact with women. His father loved his mother, but he never knew her, so all he ever saw was the dismissive way Kim Ju-sim treated other women, like insulting Tae-min's mother (in private), and how his peers fathers treated their wives- like household appliances. 'Men like women, so I like Chun-hui. Men express this like with insults and harassment, so that's what I will do.' But all subconsciously. And then his redoubled harassment and eventual assault of her was a reaction to having genuine feelings for Tae-min. The way he actually liked the kiss terrified and disgusted him, so he 'had' to

prove to himself he liked women. And Chun-hui wasn't the prettiest by beauty standards (she had wide-set eyes, a snub nose, and lots of birth marks; my little seal <3), so it was like 'Of course I like women, look I even like this ugly one!' (she was *not* ugly, I love you Chun-hui) You might think statistics-wise it could be unlikely to have three gay/gay adjacent guys in a village. Actually they were the only three gay people on Ganghwa Island, they just had to be concentrated in that one village to everyone's detriment. (joking. maybe.)
Or maybe he wasn't, but he was scared he was because he'd never actually had a real platonic connection before the way he was starting to have with Tae-min. You could view it as either one.

If you ever think women tend to suffer a lot in my stories due to the whims of men, yes that is the point. That's a theme. Unlike *some* authors/mangaka, I am entirely aware of it and am doing it on purpose.

Also during the course of her matchmaking, SH realized Tae-min and Han-jin had feelings for each other. And while she's a 'marriage for choice and love' person, she is also aware that they have no future together. She made sure they truly liked Myeong-suk and Hyang-hui as people, that they weren't just viewing them as utilities so they could continue their relationship without suspicion, and that the women had a more practical mindset when it came to marriage. 'I'm marrying him because I like him and I believe I could love him and build a family with him,' not 'I'm madly in love with him and I think he's madly in love with me, and I want him to sweep me off my feet.' And divorce is legal, so if one of them ever doesn't feel satisfied, she can break up with him in the future. She (bisexual but won't even admit it to herself at that point) has this view of... not 'they'll grow out of it,' but more 'they can move past this.' If they'd resisted in any way, she would have dropped the arrangements, but since they were willing to court the women, she knew they saw that them being together was unrealistic, and that they were willing to try/pretend to be 'normal.' SH has never been homophobic, she more saw it as giving them an out, a chance to live their lives and still be close (she made sure Myeong-suk and Hyang-hui also got along well with each other), while also escaping any social consequences for who they loved.

Liaoxi always knew they were gay. Day one. North Pyongan literally did not know until Tae-min told him over Han-jin's grave, despite having effectively given Tae-min a 'God loves you even if you're gay speech' before. Zero suspicions, even after becoming aware of the concept of gay people. *Catches them leaning really close to each other outside their house at night, murmuring intimately and leaping apart when they see him* 'They're such good friends ^^.' God granted him wisdom, not clarity.

Love And All Its Shapes (One-shot)

2022

North Pyongan had attended many funerals, and just as many private outpourings of grief after. It came with living for so long. Many of them had been friends.

This one still hurt deeper than most.

He padded across the small cemetery plot on the outskirts of Sinuiju. The mourners had all trickled away, off to be given one last meal by the family. The two had become pillars of the community in their time here. The funeral rites had been well-attended.

Now there was only one, kneeling on the fresh earth before the gravestone.

He didn't look up as North Pyongan approached. One shaking hand rhythmically stroked a small wooden tiger, made long ago by Gangwon. North Pyongan's heart ached at the thought of his Southern cousin, and at the person he had carved it for, whose name was marked on the simple stone pillar, and which the man's dark eyes were fixed on.

'Hyun Han-jin.'

When North Pyongan met the man seventy-one years ago-

'Too long.'

-he had been young, filled with the kind of delicate beauty that made his sister have to be restrained when she had been drinking so

she wouldn't punch him. It had faded now. His ear lobes drooped almost down to his shoulders, the hand that gripped the magpie-capped cane was gnarled, wrinkles spidered out around his mouth and cheeks, and worry had carved deep furrows into his forehead.

He had lived through enough to be worried about. The Occupation, the war, the Arduous March, the pandemic. Never being able to go home.

But the evidence of joy was there, too. The deep crinkles at the edges of the eyelids that had downturned at the edges, the laugh lines carved amongst those spiderweb wrinkles like ruts drawn in the sand with a stick. The man had never been a smiler- Han-jin had. But the marks were still there.

"I'm sorry for your loss," North Pyongan said quietly.

He had said it when he first arrived, and when he had helped lower him into the earth. But it needed to be said again.

"Yeah," Oh Tae-min said wearily. "I am, too."

It hadn't been damage from the chemicals Korea had been doused with back when the fires of the Great Fatherland Liberation War waged that had got Han-jin, or covid or old age. It had been stomach cancer, hidden for years but working fast once it was discovered.

It was all too common. Kangwon said it was because their kimchi had used to be made with so much salt to preserve it, that it wore their stomach lining down. If North Pyongan wasn't a Provincehuman, he would likely have it himself.

"I know this must be hard on you," he said softly.

The men had never been apart since almost the day he had met them on Ganghwa Island. They had lived together in the same house in Sinuiju, then the same street, then on the same floor. Even when one of them was needed for Party work, the other would be waiting for them when they got back, to walk them home to their

apartment bloc.

"It's hard to lose your best friend."

A weary humour pooled at the edges of Tae-min's thinned lips. "Don't tell me you really never figured it out, comrade?"

North Pyongan's brows drew in. "Figured what out?"

The smile formed. Sad and tired, but there, as he looked up at him.

"We weren't just friends," he said, and there was an ocean of grief held in the words. "We were in love."

North Pyongan's lips parted in shock. For a moment, he couldn't find his words. When he did, he asked, "...Love?"

"Yes, that kind of love." Tae-min's eyes went back to the gravestone as if drawn there by some insurmountable force. "We were lovers. Before we got married. You really never knew?"

He shook his head mutely. He hadn't. Though now that he thought about it... Some things did make more sense. Little glances over the dinner table, overheard whispers that he had been able to pass off as intimacy between childhood friends when he couldn't hear the whole conversation.

Tae-min shook his head, bemused. "I think masked noona knew. Comrade Liaoxi."

North Pyongan's heart squeezed at the name.

"I would say she did," he said quietly, thinking of some of the secret little smiles she had given him when they discussed their boys. "She was clever."

"So what now?" Tae-min asked, not looking at him. "Do you think we're freaks? I don't care if you tell anyone. I'm too old to anymore. And..." Grief flashed across his eyes as his grip on the wooden tiger

tightened. "He's gone."

Yet despite his words, he wouldn't meet North Pyongan's eyes. And his trembling hand gripped the magpie cane tighter.

He might not care if he told anyone. But he did care what he thought.

"Of course I don't think you're freaks," North Pyongan said, sorrowed that either of them had even thought he might.

Tae-min let up slightly on the wooden bird. "You never know. You used to be Christian."

"When I was Christian, I believed god made all his creations without mistakes. Something like this, that you can't choose, would be his design."

And it wasn't as if he didn't believe in god's existence anymore-something had to have created them. He just didn't believe in *him.* He believed in their people.

But it made sense that Tae-min would worry about his reaction. Not all Christians saw things the way he had. He would say most of them didn't, sadly. The men had been Christian, too, from a small religious island town. They would know that better than anyone.

'Tae-min always has been... delicate.' Back then, Kim Pan-suk had said the word carefully, like it held more meaning than it should.

North Pyongan had to wonder what had really happened with Kim Kang-sim all those years ago, if Tae-min's orientation had played some part of it.

He supposed it was lost to time. He wasn't going to ask now.

"And as a Communist, I could be disgusted by one of my people choosing to be turn reactionary or be corrupt," he told Tae-min. "I couldn't be disgusted by them feeling love."

The old man ducked his head, his shoulders loosening as he took a shaky breath. "Thanks," he said after a moment.

North Pyongan didn't feel like he deserved thanks for that.

"Would you mind if I ask," he began delicately. "If you were in love, then why did you get married to Myeong-suk and Hyang-hui?"

He was on a given name basis with their wives. He had spent many nights with the Hyun and Oh families, gathered around the dinner table and laughing over meals.

"We had to," Tae-min said quietly. "You did so much for us. Saving us, bringing us here, looking out for us. But we couldn't pull our weight the way we needed to."

He gestured to his lame leg, splayed away from his body. Han-jin's disability hadn't been so obvious- an old gunshot wound that had damaged his brachial plexus, making it so that he could never perform the manual labour he was used to again.

They had found other pursuits- lawyerdom and Party work for Tae-min, and non-intensive factory work for Han-jin. But in the aftermath of the war, work like that hadn't felt as important to some.

"We had to do our duty to our country," Tae-min said dully, holding tight to the wooden tiger. "Having kids was the only way we could."

After the war, there had been so many women and too few men. Over twenty percent of their population had been wiped out. They had paid extra care to make sure mothers would be taken care of in the aftermath to encourage them to have more children even when times were still tough. Han-jin and his wife had four, and Tae-min and his had three.

"It was easier for Han-jin," Tae-min said quietly. "He did love Myeong-suk. He could like women, too. I can't." There was guilt in his gaze. "I think Hyang-hui knows. I think she always has."

North Pyongan was saddened and horrified. "You should have told me. I could have stopped SH from setting you up."

He had helped her select the women, telling her about Tae-min and Han-jin's personalities, interests, and temperaments so she could make sure they would be happy together. Kim Myeong-suk balanced Han-jin's exuberance with her quiet nature and sharp tongue, and Pak Hyang-hui's family had been from Ganghwa like them, and helped to offset Tae-min's occasional gloom with her energy and now he was suddenly realizing that he had picked out a woman like Han-jin for Tae-min and a woman like Tae-min for Han-jin.

"Don't feel guilty, comrade," Tae-min told him. "We were both men. We didn't have a future together anyways. But you let us get a taste of one."

He gave a bittersweet smile down at the tiger. "You gave us a place to stay during the war, a kitchen, jobs, advice. A home. A place we could pretend we had a chance. Maybe it's selfish of me to say, and maybe I wouldn't have when I was young and in it, but now those feel like the happiest days of my life."

North Pyongan thought of sitting by the Taedong, listening to the water flow by as soft lips were pressed to his.

"I know what you mean," he said softly.

He could never say the war had been happy, not when so many of their people had been murdered, when even more had lost their homes like Tae-min and Han-jin.

But somehow those days did still feel golden.

"That was enough for us." Tae-min's thumb rubbed along the stripes worked into the tiger's flank. "And more than we ever would have got if it hadn't been for you. We knew from the start that we were doomed. But I could never regret him."

He tilted his head back to him with a small smile. "'The only love to regret is the love not shared,' right?"

North Pyongan closed his eyes, seeing citrine skin and moonstone eyes. "Right," he said softly.

Tae-min looked down at the little wooden tiger, stroking his finger across its muzzle. "I loved him," he said, and it sounded not like a confession to a priest, but an unburdening, finally sharing a precious secret with someone else.

North Pyongan kneeled next to him on the dirt above Han-jin's body. "Could you tell me about your relationship?"

Tae-min was the only one that truly knew about it now. The weight of a secret you had shared for decades now being solely on you with no one to help shoulder it must be crushing. North Pyongan hoped he would never experience it.

Tae-min shook his head wonderingly. "I can't believe you actually never knew. I was starting to think Han-jin was right when he said you were just being tactful. You even joined us in marriage after all."

North Pyongan tipped his head, puzzled. "I did?"

"That toast the night before our wedding," Tae-min explained, his eyes far away as he peered through the years. "When we asked you to wish us well."

North Pyongan remembered. They had asked him to toast to their future, so he had, wishing them health, prosperity, and long lives together. And love.

"It wasn't for us and our wives." Tae-min's lips curved at the edges. "It was just for us."

A secret ceremony, stolen before the official one, so that they would always feel bound to each other.

"You were Christian before, and a government official," Tae-min said. "We figured that was good enough."

"I'm honoured," North Pyongan quietly responded.

And ashamed that it had to be that way.

But he knew it did. The men had been close, close enough that if they hadn't ever gotten married and had children, especially when it was so desperately needed post-war, there would have been questions. They had never punished homosexuality on a state-level, but that wouldn't stop the people around them from punishing them. Maybe not now, but in the 50s and 60s? Tae-min might have had to be expelled from the Party if there were enough complaints. And they were already newcomers to Sinuiju. They had needed friends and comrades and community. They had lost everything else.

They had been doomed from the start. As doomed as a Korean province and a Chinese one. North Pyongan was at least glad that one doomed couple had been able to give another their chance.

Tae-min smiled down at the wooden tiger that had once belonged to the man he loved. Then he placed it on top of his gravestone.

"Han-jin always said he fell in love with me first," he said, laying his cane over his lap. "He'd argue with me about it. But I fell first. How couldn't I? He was just the one brave enough to admit it to himself." His dark eyes hid behind his drooping lids. "He was always so brave."

As the sun set, North Pyongan sat and listened to the story of two doomed lovers that had known each other for almost nine decades, one that had been woven into his own life for most of that time without him even realizing. The good, the bad, the messy, all the things that came with love.

Tae-min didn't regret his life. Not his children, not moving to Sinuiju, not the wife that he cared for, even if he didn't love her, or the unit the two families had built together. And certainly not Hyun

Han-jin. Even if he wished things had been different, he didn't regret how they were.

He and Han-jin's eldest son and daughter had been married years ago, with kids of their own, joining the Hyun and Oh families permanently. It sounded like a relief for him to say it out loud, to tell someone that their children were getting to live the lives they should have.

Perhaps one day, when they had progressed Socialism further, a great-great-grandson of the Oh-Hyun family would fall in love with a man, and there would be no barriers in their way.

But right now there was just an old man sharing stories of his brief, but far from fleeting, love.

Tae-min died a month later. 'Old age,' the coroner said, that combination of little complications that ended a life quietly and serenely.

But North Pyongan knew the truth. Oh Tae-min had died of a broken heart.

His wife had him buried next to Han-jin. They hadn't been cremated. One day, North Pyongan wanted to return their bones to Ganghwa Island and Onsu-ri, the way he had promised.

He stood over the graves, holding Tae-min's cane in his hands.

It hurt. It always did. Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-suk, Kim Chaek, Son Du-soon, Oh Mae-gyeong, Pak Eun-yu, the thousands of other people that he had had to say goodbye to. Liaoxi, in a different way.

He no longer believed in god, but he still held out hope that there was a heaven, that Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin could reunite there and be at peace without judgement, even if it didn't dull the pain of their absence here.

But grief was the price you paid for love. And in all his long years

of life, North Pyongan had never found the cost to be unfair. He could never regret Tae-min or Han-jin or any of the people he had loved, in any of the ways he had loved them.

Smiling to himself, he leaned the magpie-headed cane against the gravestone, next to the one with the tiger on it, and walked away.

After all, as someone clever and beloved had once said to them, the only love to regret was the love not shared.

North Pyongan the moment Kangwon came out: I am so happy for you let's legalize gay marriage.

I actually think post-Kangwon coming out, when he knows how Korea feels about gay people now, North Pyongan would actually be a bigger proponent for gay marriage than Kangwon. Because Kangwon has the view of 'marriage doesn't really matter, it's just there for social security, usually involving children.' He cares more about building societal acceptance of gay people so that one day gay marriage will just be a natural extension of that. And he honestly wouldn't care if gay couples could never get married so long as they were equally as accepted as straight couples in every other field. Whereas North Pyongan would be openly asking Korea to legalize gay marriage, and be more likely to bring it up in private political discussions because he just really thinks gay people need to get married for reasons he can't explain (it's definitely a holdover of his Christian mindset; 'you should be married before being intimate,' and while he's not judgemental of gay people for doing it because they have no choice, he wants to make sure they can get married *before* it; he's also still this way himself, if he got back together with Liaoning, he'd still tell her they can't be together that way until marriage (even though they can't get married), and being told he's not Christian anymore so has no reason to believe that would not dissuade him). I think to him marriage is the supreme state of love, being bound together in the eyes of the Lord I mean State. He doesn't think love without marriage is any less

precious or deep, but he does want people to be able to choose that state. Basically to Kangwon, two men living together in a house, making meals, sleeping in the same bed, being intimate is the apex of a relationship, the exact same as if it was legally recognized, while to North Pyongan that's more of a purgatory state. The apex of a relationship is marriage. And it sorrows him that people like Tae-min and Han-jin can't ever reach that apex.

I was planning this chapter in my head as I went to sleep and I started bawling. Gross weeping. I had to grab my cat and hug him to calm down. I have also cried when writing it and on every editing pass. I am crying right now as I post this.

Xiao Chao

[image]

[image]

[image]

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This is why North couldn't have met China when he was 'young.' He has severe cuteness aggression when it comes to kids, and even though North was physically 16, he was definitely small enough to trigger it.

Their dynamic would be different if they had actually met back then. China wouldn't be able to be as teasing and overly familiar as he'd want to be. As we all know, North doesn't like being looked down on or patronized, or made to feel like he's being embarrassed. In canon, he's had years of leading the KPRA, the experience of CCCP treating him with respect, and the admiration and control that comes with finally being able to govern his country as Korea when he meets China. But this North hasn't been leading a large force for very long (Korea's Army was more focused on covert operations and was never huge, for a guerrilla group), is dispossessed of his own nation, and would still view every foreign Countryhuman as an undisputed threat, someone who wants to subjugate him. His only experience with one would still be Japan. This, combined with the fact that he has a child's body (though 16 wasn't really considered a child back then in the same way it is now, it still wasn't a 'respectable' age), would make him far more sensitive to being looked down on, which would make him even more touchy and hostile towards China and... the way he is. China would be aware of this, and would also despise the idea of making another colonized country feel like he was being disrespected, so would have to restrain his usual personality, to put on a mask,

which is something he woudn't want to do with the person he wants to be his new best friend, and woudn't let him get to know him the way he wants to. He woudn't be able to test (and invade) North's boundaries the way he does in canon. And if you let North keep you at arm's length, at arm's length you will stay.

This is how China would *want* to act with him (I love the nickname Xiao Chao, but North would cut out China's tongue before he let him call him that). He might venture to try it if they'd been comrades for several years, but North's reaction would let him know not to try again. If adult North was called that, he would glower and threaten him, but China would recognize he could get away with it once and awhile, just to tease him (though China doesn't do this, as he exclusively uses it on those he's big brothering- kids, his provinces, his leaders(?)). But young North would be violently against the idea of a foreign Countryhuman patronizing him, which is what he would see 'Little Chao' as. There would be no world in which he saw it as affection.

This aside, their relationship would be different in other ways as well. China would still be obsessed with him, but his age would eventually make him see him less like a friend and more like a little brother. (despiteNorthactuallybeingolder) This wouldn't change when he aged up. I think during the Fatherland Liberation War, North would actually be able to change China's mind on his idea of family. If you read Chasing Liberty (and you're around 300 chapters in), you know he doesn't believe Countryhumans can truly have family, and if they think they do, it will usually end unpleasantly. But I think if China met North young, he would eventually come to view him as a real brother. However if North got any hint of this, he would completely shut down around him. If you know North's version of family, it's 'family is only the people you are related to.' Or for Countryhumans- family is only the person you share your people and country with. South is his only family. He is South's brother and no one else's. Even if China just teasingly asked him to call him gege, totally normal for an unrelated boy and man, it would completely set him off (but China woudn't ask him to, with his previous considerations; he also woudn't start out wanting to see another country as a brother). This actually does happen between

canon North and Russia at one point, you may see the one-shot someday.

They wouldn't be able to spend too much time together during the fight against Japan, as China has a very large country to travel, but he would definitely get at least a month or two in of staying at a Korean Secret Camp on Paektusan, claiming it was to coordinate their actions and work on his own operations in his own northeast. But after he left, they would exchange letters (though it's hard to get them to their recipients). I think in the future it would make North even more reluctant to ask China for aid during the Great Fatherland Liberation War, since he woudn't want to 'encourage him.'

Though the real thing to consider here is that China would have told North about South being in Chongqing. I think he'd consider it first, since South bores him and he woudn't want him 'intruding,' but would eventually decide to, since if North ever found out he didn't tell him about his brother, it would ruin their relationship permanently. He'd also be interested in seeing what North chose. If he'd stay to fight with his people at a critical moment, or if he'd set off across war-torn China on what could be a year-long journey to get his brother. I think if you asked North what he would choose, he would tell you of course he'd go for his brother. But I think if he was actually given the choice, he might not like his real decision.

If South *was* there, China would make his complex a hundred times worse.

Sweeping in to greet North 'North! Comrade! My best friend! I've missed you so much!'
North, irritably: My brother is here too.
Disinterested look at South Hello. *back to North* How have you been? Have you been eating? I brought ginseng tea for you, let's go share a cup while we catch up. ^^

He doesn't do it on purpose. China just has zero care for people that don't interest him. In canon this is also true, but he also does very much do it on purpose. He is *incredibly* passive-aggressive with South in a way he can plausibly deny, but South is very much aware of.

Also human China to match with the North and South I made before. Pre-1990 and current day hair. His earring is a clip-on so it doesn't leave a hole, for disguise purposes. I want him who said that

Summertime!

[image] [image] [image]

If you missed my Chasing Liberty chapter yesterday, happy Liberation Day to Korea!

Provinces at the beach. They were helping a child build a sandcastle, but she left and they're still here, now discussing the best way to construct a to-scale replica of Taedongmun. Things are getting heated.
Hwang sunburns while Hae doesn't, despite both having white flag bases, because while they all have Korean skin, no matter what colour it is, Hwang's is the skin of a Korean who doesn't go outside if he can help it. Yes he's wearing sunscreen.

And now, the long-awaited North Hamgyong in a pink bikini.

I am so sorry please don't make me a casualty

And Ryanggang. About to be a victim.

Since it's the last month of summer, here's what swimsuits the cast would prefer to wear:
North- full clothing. If he had to wear one, it would be a military wetsuit, even though he hates the cling. In general he doesn't like swimming because there's nothing comfortable he can wear.

SH- blue and white-spotted one-piece with a skirt and built-in shorts. It looks more like a short dress. She likes to be mostly covered.

Hae- pink and white one-piece with short legs, no skirt. Aerodynamic, but for water.

South Pyongan- she has that dark blue tank-top style swimsuit. The white, yellow-striped part is this piece of fabric that wraps around like a sash. I have a similar swimsuit (but in pink) that I actually bought because I thought it was very her. This is how I make all my

wardrobe decisions. The top hangs like a long shirt, but she has sport bikini bottoms under it. She'd wear a two-piece bikini, but North and SH would never allow it.

North Pyongan- navy and white swim bottoms, as short as North will allow, for maximum skin to ocean contact.

North Hamgyong- not the pink bikini, unfortunately. Long black shorts. I think he'd want to wear a tank top, but would hate the cling when it got wet.

Kangwon- long, loose green shorts. Not pictured above are his goggles for protecting his eyes from saltwater. No shoes, he wants to feel the sand.

Hwang- slim, knee-length black shirts with red racing stripes. He'd have some contraption to let him wear goggles over his glasses. Though he's more of a 'look for interesting things and read' person than a swimming person.

Ryanggang- he wants just plain black shirts, but SH made him wear the yellow. 'It's a beach colour!' They're the loose kind. He doesn't like swimming too much, but he also doesn't have a choice in that.

Chagang- those tight, long swim pants that end at the calf. Black with blue camouflage patterns.

China- public swimsuit? Black and red 'shorts' that are as short as they can go while still being shorts. Private swimsuit? Mao-style. I won't elaborate.

South- He prefers tighter clothes, so ideally he'd like to wear a black swim shirt with long sleeves, and black swim pants, both with red and blue accents. But he has an image to sell, so he'd go with tight, thigh-length shorts with the same colour scheme, and no top.

Krim- one of those one-pieces with a built in skirt. It has pockets for beach treasure. She really likes swimming, and especially being launched at full speed into the sea by Russia.

Russia- long shorts with his tricolour stripes. He wears one of this loose beach shirts if he's on a public beach or with Krim. The chest

is open, he just wants to cover his arms.

Ukraina- she gets the only bikini on the list. In a nice blue. Don't ask about the huge scar on her abdomen, you will be drowned.

CCCP- those really tiny swim... bikinis that Soviet men probably shouldn't have been wearing. You can see what I mean in the October Revolution But Sexy chapter. But he'd wear black if it wasn't for a photoshoot.

Canada- maple-leaf patterned loose shorts. He also burns easily.

UIP- white swim shirt (non-see-through fabric), and black, red, white, and green long, loose shorts.

America- Definitely a stars and stripes speedo. Sorry.

There's a trend I see of Westerners here 'admiring' Japanese and South Koreans for 'how peaceful their protests are.' One American (I think) man said South Korea was one of the best examples of direct democracy he'd ever seen. This shows that 1) they don't have any education at all on the history of Japan or Korea, and 2) that man in specific doesn't know what direct democracy is. Not even counting pre-1945, South Koreans have a long history of violent protests. The Jeju Islanders before they got massacred, the Yeosu-Suncheon uprising, the Gwangju Uprising, not to mention all the smaller anti-Rhee, anti-American Military Government, anti-military dictatorship protests. The outright dictatorships only ended because of those violent protests (though we know capitalist democracy is just the dictatorship of the bourgeois). They just got pacified after that by 'democracy,' and groomed to think since they're one now, their voices will be listened to, when that's objectively not true. Yoon Suk-yeol's little martial law embarrassment was only shut down because it was inconvenient for the rest of the government, not because the people demanded it. Because when it comes to things that *would* be inconvenient for them- better workers' rights, women's rights, gay marriage, and most of all war games like Freedom Shield, and the existence of the US bases- all things South Koreans have huge protests for or against every year, nothing ever

changes. I'm mostly focusing on South Korea here because that's the video I keep thinking about, but the exact same thing happened in Japan. The student protests in the 60s were violent and saw gains. And then they were shut down, and society was groomed to think that violence is impolite and inconvenient, and we'll never get what we want that way, when in reality that is the *only* way we will get what we want. The government is forced to agree to some small changes to placate us in the moment, then quickly bring to bear their propaganda so that we won't put any force behind more drastic ones in the future. Koreans and Japanese are not 'so polite and peaceful,' we have a long history of armed struggle and insurrection, that our own governments are doing their best to make us forget, or think of with distaste, along with the way we were quite impolitely violently put down and massacred by them and the American occupation forces.

Direct democracy is not the ability to protest openly and be ignored. It is ordinary people being able to participate in democracy and *actually make changes.* When you examine places like the DPRK, Cuba, or China, you will actually see direct democracy in action. Local people that are elected by their neighbours into high-ranking positions like the Supreme People's Assembly and get to guide policy decisions, mass meetings where normal people can make their voices heard, the sheer people to Party contact that China has. Socialist countries are always in flux and changing, making progress (even under the severe sanctions and blockading most are under) because they have direct democracy, while capitalist countries like Japan, South Korea, and America reach a peak then stagnate because there is only so much change that can be allowed when businesses are in control of your country. You can win small gains that are at risk of being taken away if lobbyists pay for them to be, but no *real* victory. Americans can't even reach that 'peak' because their health insurance moguls will never let them have free healthcare. You can protest all you want, you'll never have free housing because the landlords and bankers don't want you to. You will never be paid a fair wage because the CEO that owns the company you work at needs his yacht, vacations, and three separate mansions. The forever wars will never end because they make good money and reinforce the propaganda at home that you are lucky to be where you are, lucky to be in a 'democracy.' And the American bases will never leave because our governments are too afraid that

without them, we wouldn't have protection from the people they're trying to destroy, inside and out of our borders.

Liberation Day was eighty-one years and a day ago, but half of Korea is still under foreign occupation. And until the American Empire is defeated, none of us are free.

Sugar Daddy

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

Featuring: a photo I took on my China trip. There is no filter. The tree was just that obnoxiously green.

China is both Russia and Krim's sugar daddy/rich aunt. And Krim is his in to more economic ventures. I like to think her room and wardrobe look veritably Chinese from how much he buys her. Russia probably also has red lanterns and fifty fortune charms in the house.
He knows the Chinese Adidas jacket can be controversial in China (because it's Qing-style), but he doesn't care. He wanted it. It's also possibly off-brand anyway. China himself doesn't actually care whether something is Manchu or Han, as they are both Chinese. He's also pleased when foreign brands market a Chinese aesthetic, even without understanding the culture behind it, because it means his cultural influence is growing.

I feel like every time Russia takes Krim somewhere and is seen, it's an entire issue. Ukraina goes to the UN and freaks out about 'a rightful Ukrainian territory' being taken to other countries, and plays up the daughter card, trying to get Russia and whoever he visits punished in some way, even though it never progresses beyond more than a diplomatic scuffle. Because of this, North refuses to let Russia bring her almost ever (which is why he's irked when he does in Safeway Pyongyang). Also because of the 'North Korea kidnapping Ukrainian children!!' accusation, which is quite literally because some Krimean kids (who are *Russian* citizens*)* go to the international children's camp there. He's like 'Russia, *you* have enough sway to escape actual penalties, they will sanction *me* over rumours alone. *Do not bring your daughter here.'* Much to Russia's dismay, because he really wants them to 'spend time as a family' like in the past. But China has enough influence that he can basically flick problems of that small a scale away, so he's fine with Russia bringing her so long as he doesn't rub it in Ukraina's face

after.

Ukraina for her part isn't entirely scared that one of them *would* hurt Krim, since she used to be close with both of them, and CCCP very much enforced the idea of 'these are your big brothers' (no matter how much North openly rejected that, and the Soviet kids were the only children China didn't encourage to call him Big Brother, using Uncle instead). There's a reason why when she's freaking out over Canada in Warring Pyongyang, it's Korea that comes in and says 'It's me,' and eventually manages to calm her down. Despite their political clashes, and that neither of them can really say they like the other anymore, personally they've only really interacted positively, even if it was decades ago. Her conditioning does lead her to *wanting* to believe that they would hurt Krim though. Because if they're the way she remembers them, then maybe her father was, too. And he can't be.

But her shared past with North is at least enough for her to turn America down when he suggests it would be easier to force through a 'no travel' rule for Krim if she maybe implied that he did something to Ukraina when she was a child, and she was worried he might do it to Krim, too (he wouldn't try this with China- you don't accuse someone else of having skeletons in their closest when you're pretty sure they've been looking into the ones you actually have in yours- but North is enough of a pariah with more limited information channels that he could, and frequently does). Ukraina also isn't like America- she's a victim of propaganda, not the controller of it. She doesn't care morally about his suggestion, and wouldn't tell the truth if he got one of her other former siblings to claim that, but it's her idea of 'They are evil because they are evil, I don't have to invent crap to make them seem more evil.'

Which is good. North is already accused of a lot of heinous crimes by random paid defectors. To have it come from 1) another country, along with the West's favourite victim, and 2) someone he once cared for 'totally not like a little sister' would be devastating, both politically and personally. He also might not stop Russia the next time he was clearly thinking about committing violence at a UN meeting, or let him stop him.

Two guys and the Russian they *totally* don't view as a little brother.

North definitely made Russia put on socks and pants, and China close his robe more before they were 'allowed' (he wouldn't push them out) in bed.

Not canon, but only because North doesn't let himself sleep near them in modern day. China and Russia do. Canon would be those two cuddling together in the other bed, and North staring at the ceiling, alone, yearning, and regretful. And China pretending to sleep while hating the necessity of masks. And also maybe hating his.

Based off of this from 4shiro's Pinterest (thank you!)

Bisque Doll

[image] [image][image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

I am using North as a dress-up doll. Enjoy! And sorry North.

Modern underwear and (some) of his scars.

Pajama.

His usual outing wear during Kim Il-sung's leadership (matchy match).Also what he wears to Party meetings modern day, but with his pins.

His usual outing wear during Kim Jong-il's leadership (matchy-match; slut era- exposed neck)

Usual outing wear with Kim Jong-un. (matchy-match) Sick ass leather jacket.

Winter outfit. He doesn't wear a hat unless he's up in Chagang, Ryanggang, or North Hamgyong and trying to set a good example (and SH puts it on his head before he leaves).

Active/casual combat uniform. This is what he'd wear to perform troop inspections or give speeches to the army, or if he's working with them to build things.

Dress uniform (sans hat). What he wears on holidays for speeches.

Choson-ot (rarely worn). It's specifically for visiting older comrades who aren't veterans (because then he'd be in uniform), perhaps on the International Day of Older Persons. Which is also on China's birthday. Sorry, comrade, he's choosing the elderly over you. Or if SH and Hae bug him enough.

And we all know his casual outfit of 'black workshirt and pants.' I can't stress enough that I just draw the others in the same clothes for convenience- they all have a large wardrobe gathered over the

decades, so are always wearing different outfits, even Ryanggang. North quite literally owns eight black workshirts (one for each day of the week, plus an extra in case of accident), and a *small* selection of other clothes made for him by SH without permission, most of which are above. And all of his pants are black. And obviously none of them are jeans. He still feels like he has too many clothes.

I had a nice moment with a stranger a couple weeks ago. I was in the city heading to my friend's place when it started raining severely at night. I don't mind the rain, but I had my phone and a gift for my friend, so I sheltered under a store overhang with some other people and started talking to a man to pass the time. We were showing each other photos of our cats. The rain wasn't stopping, so I said I was going to call a taxi and offered to let him get in with me, since he had said he lived up the road, and it was on the way. He agreed, and was really nice about it. He was very concerned I wouldn't be comfortable letting a stranger in with me, and said I could wait until he was gone to give friend's address to the driver. So I called the taxi, but they couldn't find me. I tried twice and for some reason they just never arrived. So eventually the rain slowed down slightly, and the guy said he was going to try going, and asked if I wanted to come with him so he could give me a raincoat. I said it was okay, but asked if I could have a plastic bag for my phone and gift. So we sprinted to his apartment (I waited in the lobby) and he gave me a reusable bag and a coat he insisted I take, and said I didn't have to return it. I got to walk back to my friend mostly dry and with phone unharmed. If you look out for the people around you, they will look out for you.
And a cute moment I had this weekend- friends and I were in a Chinatown, and I was watching some aunties dance. I was wearing a qipao they complimented, and once they were done they brought me in to take a group photo with them.
I love people ＜3

Fem China

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

But first, a concept.
Canada and America at a restaurant
Canada to the waiter: "M-Menu please."
America: "Nada, buddy, he doesn't care about the men you please."
Waiter laughs
Canada, bright red and shaking, fists clenched on his lap.
Then when he goes home, still running that over and over in his mind in bed, his eyes suddenly fly open as he shoots up.
"Wait a second, that joke didn't even make sense! I said 'men-*u* please, not men-*i* please.'"
But he can never say that to America or he'll make fun of him for letting it get to him. So it just haunts him forever.

Anyway

China genderbend. Or- *squints* This might just be China dressed as a woman.
Ah wait. No. Eyelashes. That means she's female.

Also the message board is being weird today, so I think I have to respond to everyone tomorrow. ㅜㅜ

Slightly related to women, there's this video of a DPRK-Russia joint goods exhibition, and there's a North Korean woman standing next to a Russian woman and they look identical. They both have the same glasses, hairstyle, face. The only difference is their skin and hair color. I went to my phone to pull up a picture of mother and started cry-laughing because she looked so similar, too. It's that puffy, permed(?) hairstyle that does it. The great connecting thread of humanity is aunties.

Kangwon and his anti-smoking campaign.

...him.

China's outfit inspired by this woman in particular. I wore cheongsam to the city last weekend, and a Chinese auntie said I wore it well. A random girl also said I looked cute to her friend, and said she loved boba (I was drinking it). I will have an inflated ego for precisely three more days.

Also I was focused on this group of tourists speaking Mandarin in front of me while we waited to cross the road, and trying to get my last boba. Then they started walking, so I did, too. And then we all almost got hit by a car because it was not time to cross yet, and I had to shout an apology to the driver and run shamefully back to my friends. Now *I* didn't realize it wasn't time to cross because I was outside of my body thinking about Mao Zedong and boba. But why did *they* plunge into oncoming traffic??

The real DPRK anti-smoking campaign (and a prime example of an auntie; I know at least three women that look like this in my life). I quietly show this photo to my friends on the train whenever someone smells strongly of cigarette smoke.

I forget where I found this. I think it was a South Korean article about jjimjilbang. It's menacing aura pleases me.

I changed my mind. Takaichi is actually a hero of the working class because she proves even wealthy people can have cockroaches. And... make friends with them? Never mind I changed my mind again.

Only One Bed?

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

A redraw of something from a long time ago. ^^

Things to note- China's arm looks so long because he has long sleeves on his undershirt, too. He's very committed to the bit.
North is no longer comfortable sleeping near China with his missing eye exposed.
North is also not comfortable facing the door with his blind side, but doesn't want to come off as nervous and paranoid to China by sleeping the opposite way on the bed (and will not sleep on his side, facing him).
North no longer fully trusts China, but he does at least trust that his sharp senses will make up for his blind spot, and since he isn't actually going to sleep anyways, he can uneasily tolerate having him between him and the door.
North gave him the pillow right after this.

Being stuck in New York would be North's worst nightmare. There's definitely a ritzy hotel on the United Nations grounds specifically for Countryhumans to stay in for the sessions (though they usually don't stay as long as their human representatives), or if they have extra business after a General Assembly, but he would *not* be staying in it. North comes specifically for days he is actually 'permitted' to speak, then leaves. And I think he checks the weather obsessively before going, and if it looked like it might be severe enough to trap him there, he would sacrifice the trip, even though making his case at them is important to him. If a storm came on all of a sudden he would fully be prepared to fly into it.

UN: Okay everyone, this storm looks fairly bad, so flights will be grounded today. There are rooms being prepared-
North, shoving by him, fully prepared to kill him and everyone on board in a crash so long as they don't die in America: Move.

Quite literally the only thing that could stop him would be if the storm was already going, and his diplomats actually pushed back

like, 'Comrade, please, we don't want you to die in a plane crash.' And he would only back down because he doesn't want *them* to die in a plane crash. If he was forced to stay, he wouldn't be sleeping with China. They try to stay away from each other at UN events because China doesn't want anyone to know they're still friends, not just strategic allies. North would be trying to take a room near Russia as he's the one other person he feels like he can even slightly count on, and also to be a witness (with a recording, he knows any eyewitness testimony from him would never be believed) if America tries to start anything with either of them (which he would, the only reason he wouldn't get the chance is because China would be distracting him with drinks; internally: 'Play your mind games with me and not my friends with short tempers and already bad images').

Countryhumans aren't allowed weapons at the General Assembly, and North is always searched especially thoroughly (unlike certain other countries), and being around a bunch of people that can actually kill him, some of which *do* want to kill him and most of which wouldn't care if someone did, with no gun or knife is his worst scenario. He would be highly suspicious and on edge the entire time, on the verge of a full-blown paranoia attack. He would worry about his diplomats being bribed or being enemy agents (no matter how much he trusted them, he doesn't trust America), so he'd shut them all up in the same room as him. None of them would be allowed to talk because he'd be wary of hidden microphones (which there definitely are). So it would just be him, his General Assembly representative and the entire aid team, male and female, crammed into the same room sitting in silence while North stands directly in front of the door all night. Don't even *think* about going to the toilet. Also no food or drink unless it's something they brought. It's just a bad experience for everyone involved. If driving was capable, North would probably just take them straight to the airport to sleep in the plane on the tarmac (while he stands in front of the door, the gun he has on board in hand).

In general a lot of countries are on edge when they attend meetings. The Europeans might be drinking together and having a good time (realpolitiking), but anyone even slightly anti-colonial, or even just with personal friction between them and someone else, would be more alert. Even some of the right-wing non-Euro countries that are

friendly with each other and might take the chance to do their own negotiating and drinking would be more reserved, aware that they're in the same building as former colonizers or current neo-ones. It's one of the few chances an enemy would have to plant drugs/drug you/get you drunk and make you do something blackmail-worthy/bait you into violence/etcetera. America would try to do this North and Russia (amongst others), but China would have people on them giving an extra layer of security against it (unbeknownst to them, since it would just freak North out more, and Russia would tell North). North would just be *the* most on edge. Going home to call Kim Jong-un and tell him he's never leaving the country again (he will) then sit under his desk and bristle like a cat.

Especially torturous experience if South is there. For both of them. 'I'm sleeping in the same building as him I'm sleeping in the same building as him he's right there sleeping in the same building as me.'

Ansarallah is liberating Yemen. Mashallah.